

Mullins has gone too far

by Stuart Ellis
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Tags:
[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.

First, what is the NGO AFAC?

AFAC is the Australian and New Zealand National Council for fire, emergency services and land management, creating synergies across the emergency management sector and obviously qualified to make the statement through the CEO <https://www.afac.com.au/teams/network>

About CEO Stuart Ellis, AM

Stuart Ellis is an experienced leader in the emergency management sector and was appointed Chief Executive Officer of AFAC in 2012. Stuart is focussed on national initiatives that progress the effectiveness and professional standing of fire and emergency services and has a focus on progressing an industry wide, integrated approach to emergency management.

Previously, Stuart Ellis was the Chief Executive Officer/Chief Officer of the South Australian Country Fire Service. In 2002 he established a consultancy company and has been involved in over 20 operational reviews including the Canberra Bushfires, the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission and the operational response to the Christchurch Earthquake.

Prior to that Stuart was an Army Officer for 22 years serving with the Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment. He was Commanding Officer at the Royal Military College, Duntroon and commanded an Australian contingent in Somalia in 1994. He became a Member of the Order of Australia in 1996.

Stuart has a Bachelor of Arts Degree and Graduate Diplomas in Strategic Studies and Management Studies.

About the NGO Climate Council

“We’re made up of some of the country’s leading climate scientists, health, renewable energy and policy experts, as well as a team of staff, and a huge community of volunteers and supporters who power our work. As an independent voice on climate change, we get climate stories into the media, produce hard-hitting reports, call out misinformation as we see it and promote climate solutions such as the transition to renewables.” <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/about/>



“The verdict from bushfire experts: there’s no sidestepping climate”

<https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/the-verdict-from-bushfire-experts-theres-no-sidestepping-climate/>

“Call out misinformation as we see it” ... The Howitt Society, a new player on the block will be doing the same.

Greg Mullins, AO, AFSM



EXPERTISE

Bushfires

“Greg Mullins is an internationally recognised expert in responding to major bushfires and natural disasters and developed a keen interest in the linkages between climate change and extreme weather events.” <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/author/greg-mullins/>

Expert the result of blitz marketing by the Climate Council that’s never been challenged until now by the AFAC CEO?

And Greg’s entourage and their statement on climate action. Some you may recognise <https://emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au/who-we-are/>

“We are a growing cohort of former senior Australian fire and emergency service leaders who have observed how Australia is experiencing increasingly catastrophic extreme weather events that are putting lives, properties and livelihoods at greater risk and overwhelming our emergency services.”

And their statement “Australia Unprepared for Worsening Extreme Weather” https://emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CC_MVSA0184-Firefighting-and-Emergency-Services-Statement-A4-Version_V4-FA.pdf

“We, the undersigned, who are former senior Australian fire and emergency service leaders, have observed how Australia is experiencing increasingly catastrophic extreme weather events that are putting lives, properties and livelihoods at greater risk and overwhelming our emergency services.

“Climate change, driven mainly by the burning of coal, oil and gas, is worsening these extreme weather events, including hot days, heatwaves, heavy rainfall, coastal flooding and catastrophic bushfire weather. Australia has just experienced a summer of record-breaking heat, prolonged heatwaves, and devastating fires and floods - there should be no doubt in anyone’s mind: climate change is dangerous and it is affecting all of us now.”

How old is the statement? Web source information currently shows "the entourage date Published": "2020-04-29T20:16:46+00:00", "dateModified": "2020-08-04T11:16:57+00:00"

In fairness to those listed, how many have had second thoughts about signing the statement ... there are some on the list who are well qualified and experienced in the area of interest to The Howitt Society and there are others who are pretenders <https://thehowittsociety.com/home/our-values/>

Uniforms or previous positions don't necessarily maketh an authoritative advocate.

Money, money, money...

Recurring theme throughout the Climate Change website is the request for donations, shaking the trusting down for money?

Given the antics of the Climate Council and in the best interests of emergency management in Victoria we'll continue to watch and comment as appropriate.

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