



Response to the Wooroloo Bushfire Inquiry

12 October 2021

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Glossary of Acronyms

AVL	Automatic Vehicle Locator
BOM	Bureau of Meteorology
CESM	Community Emergency Services Manager
Commcen	Communications Centre
CoS	City of Swan
DBCA	Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions
DFES	Department of Fire and Emergency Services
DFRA	Disaster Relief Funding Arrangements
DoC	Department of Communities
DPIRD	Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
FTE	Full time equivalent
IC	Incident Controller
ICC	Incident Control Centre
IMT	Incident Management Team
IMG	Incident Management Group
ISG	Incident Support Group
LEMA	Local Emergency Management Arrangements
MRWA	Main Roads Western Australia
RAP	Restricted Access Permit
RCNDA	Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements
SoM	Shire of Mundaring
TIMS	Telstra Integrated Messaging Service
USAR	Urban Search and Rescue (DFES)
VBFB	Volunteer Bushfire Brigade
VFRS	Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service
WALGA	Western Australian Local Government Association
WAPF	WA Police Force

Introduction

This submission is from the Shire of Mundaring and was endorsed by the Shire of Mundaring Council at the Ordinary Meeting of Council on 12 October 2021.

Notwithstanding this, the response to the Wooroloo Bushfire was a joint recovery operation between the Shire of Mundaring and City of Swan, with collaboration at every stage. Both local governments have consulted on their respective submissions and jointly support their respective submissions.

Terms of Reference Point 1

Evaluate the first stage of the review of the Wooroloo Bushfire and undertake independent analysis across the range of focus areas examined, including response to the Wooroloo Bushfire, fuel management and processes for access into the fire affected areas.

Response

Overall the response to the Wooroloo Bushfire was rapid, escalated appropriately and was well resourced. In addition, the key agencies involved in the response phase, such as Shire of Mundaring (and City of Swan) staff and their respective Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade (VBFB) personnel, Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), and Western Australia Police Force (WAPF), operated in a collaborative and consultative manner.

Fuel Management

Shire of Mundaring, in accordance with its statutory obligations and in cognisance of the bushfire risk profile within its district, has a multifaceted bushfire risk management program including, but not limited to:

- A team of Shire staff with specific bushfire risk management responsibilities, including:
 - Fire Protection Officers (2 FTE), who are principally involved in bush fire mitigation activities across Shire owned/controlled lands;
 - Fire Hazard Inspection Officers (2 FTE), who are responsible for a year round program of inspection, education and enforcement across land of all tenure in relation to bushfire hazard abatement and risk management; and
 - Bush Fire Risk Management Officer, (0.4FTE transitioning to 1FTE), who is responsible for administration and coordination of the Shire's Bush Fire Risk Management Plan and Mitigation Activity Fund (MAF)

works program and liaison with major land owners/managers (particularly relating to Crown lands).

All of the above staff hold or have held senior roles with Shire VBFBs and thus can undertake roles within incident management teams formed in response to bushfires of all levels;

- A Community Emergency Services Manager (CESM), which is a joint Shire and DFES funded position;
- A bushfire service, encompassing nine VBFBs with approximately 450 registered volunteers. This service also includes the Mundaring Firefighters' School, with a pool of accredited trainers from within the nine VBFBs to provide a comprehensive program of accredited training courses to VFBF members throughout the entirety of their volunteer service.

The VBFBs are all active in community engagement and fuel management activities in addition to their response roles;

- Preparation and publishing of a Fire and Burning Information Booklet and annual Firebreak and Fuel Load Notice (under *S33 Bush Fires Act 1954*); and
- A range of community preparedness activities and events, including the Winter Burning ("how to") program.

While the Wooroloo Bushfire, in the main, impacted privately owned lands, the issue of bushfire fuel loads within vegetated road verges has been raised as a concern by community members. It is noted that Shire of Mundaring is the management authority for local road reserves and could use MAF funding to undertake bush fire risk management treatments within those verges. Shire of Mundaring will therefore consider the ranking of road verges in regard to the Shire's overall bushfire risk management profile in planning for its upcoming bush fire mitigation program/s.

In that regard recommendation 12.1 of the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements – Report 28 October 2020*, (RCNND A Report), is noted as follows:

“Recommendation 12.1 Roadside vegetation management 271 State and territory governments, working with local governments and fire and emergency service agencies, should ensure that there are appropriate arrangements for roadside vegetation management that take into account, among other things: (1) priority access and egress routes (2) road priority, utility and strategic value (3) cost, and (4) residual risk to national natural disasters.”

This submission will include a recommendation in relation to the RCNNDA Report in relation to Terms of Reference 9.

Processes for Access into the Fire Affected Areas

This response will cover processes for access into the fire affected areas by residents (and others) following the passing of the fire front.

Access to affected areas when the fire front had passed by residents was a cause of resident concern, both for those caught outside and those that remained inside the affected area. In this regard, future preparedness programs should focus on the ability of residents to be self-supporting on their own properties for a period of time (e.g. 72 or 96 hours). It is requested that consideration be given to the provision of some form of assistance to residents that have stayed on their property to defend it.

Recommendation R1:

That DFES facilitate the formation of a key stakeholder group to develop and implement a preparedness program for residents within bushfire prone areas. This relates to residents being prepared to remain on their properties (if safe to do so) following a bushfire while there may be disruptions to power and water supplies, access/egress restrictions etc. for an extended period.

A DFES Restricted Access Permit (RAP) issuing team was initially based at the Wooroloo Forward Control Point, however this then moved to the City of Swan Emergency Services Centre, located in Middle Swan. That was unreasonably distant from some affected areas.

It was noted that some people/organisations gained access to the impacted areas prior to residents being allowed access, e.g. media. This caused distress amongst the Wooroloo community.

Recommendation R2:

That DFES, in consultation with key stakeholders, including local governments, review the application and resourcing of the Restricted Access Permit system.

Terms of Reference Point 2

Examine the effectiveness of the use of heavy earthmoving equipment in the fire suppression effort including the systems, processes and capability that supports this.

The use of heavy earthmoving equipment/machinery was considered to be effective overall. Without machinery, access to the fire ground would have been impeded.

A request by the Incident Controller (IC) to DFES Communications Centre (Commcen) for machinery prior to the s13 handover of control of the incident from Shire of Mundaring to DFES was not actioned until s13 handover. This caused a delay in the installation of containment lines.

All/any machinery deployed to the fire ground must be fitted/supplied with Radio and Automatic Vehicle Locator (AVL) units.

Divisional incident control officers with heavy workloads were required to handle queries from a State Government Department for Treasury representative, querying matters such as machinery log books. These protocols should be well established at the State level.

Self-deployment of private individual/landowner machines occurred, resulting in an improperly applied and uncoordinated effort.

It is understood that DFES are reviewing aspects of the use of heavy earthmoving equipment in bush fire suppression.

Recommendation R3:

That DFES, in consultation with key stakeholders, including local governments, continue to review the use of heavy earthmoving equipment/machinery in the suppression of bushfire.

Terms of Reference Point 3

Examine the effectiveness of interagency coordination during the response and initial recovery phases of the incident.

Overall, interagency coordination, particularly in terms of the response phase, was effective. DFES, DBCA, Shire of Mundaring, VBFBS and WAPF collaborated and consulted appropriately.

The first responding brigades, being Wooroloo VBFB, Mount Helena VBFB and Mundaring Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service (VFRS), were tasked by DFES Commcen around 1204 hrs on 1 February 2021 to what was reported as a “structure fire”.

The initial incident controller was a Shire of Mundaring employee, who was also a Deputy Chief Bushfire Control Officer for the Shire.

The spread of the bushfire was such that a multitude of additional firefighting resources were then progressively requested by the IC and subsequently tasked to the incident.

Two Shire of Mundaring Liaison officers deployed to the initial incident control point/s at approximately 12.30 and 13.30 hours respectively to undertake local government liaison roles. These officers continued to be present at the Incident Control Centre (ICC) or on call 24 hours per day for the duration of the incident.

The Initial DFES IC was seemingly unaware of protocols in relation to the establishment of an evacuation centre, stating he was authorised to make the decision. The Shire’s Liaison officer advised that that the decision was actually a Department of Communities decision, in consultation with the local government and DFES via the incident Controller (IC).

Shire Liaison officers, WAPF commander and the DFES IMT officer at the forward control point/initial ICC would arrange for the location and deployment of Vehicle Control Points (VCPs), only to have WAPF communications make telephone contact with other Shire officers offsite and not tasked to the fire, requesting that similar actions be undertaken. This resulted in confusion and wasted effort in telephone calls to all concerned to ensure that all parties were updated as to agreed actions.

Upon establishment of the ICC at Mundaring Arena, field IMT divisional command officers felt isolated and detached from the main IMT structure and Once IC became the responsibility of pre-formed teams (as compared to the initial team) overall coordination was seen as partially ineffective.

While the Mundaring Arena ICC facility was very well catered in terms of welfare/food/drink for all involved at that location, the distribution of food and drink to firefighters and others in the field and fire ground was not coordinated to match with crew rotations.

Initial recovery activities by SoM and CoS was rapid, and officers, processes and arrangements were activated while still in response phase.

In the main SoM was supported by DFES officers in the identification and application of early recovery needs and activities. ISG meetings were generally well run, concise and action focussed.

ISG meetings were initially supported well by DFES in terms of the electronic equipment necessary to facilitate meetings, where a number of the required attendees were off-site (using videoconferencing technology such as Webex, MS Teams etc.). It was noted, however, that in the process of changing over the IMT, the departing team took its electronic equipment with it, and ISG meetings were then required to be supported by a single mobile phone in the middle of a large conference table.

The handover or handing back of the incident from DFES to local government control is of significant concern. That handover is coupled with the expectation that roads will be reopened to facilitate residents being able to return to their properties. Shire of Mundaring was under considerable pressure to accept that handover and then reopen roads. However, firefighting divisional command staff reported that the roads concerned were still subject to considerable firefighting appliance traffic and other agency emergency response vehicle traffic. This created an unreasonably increased risk of injury to emergency personnel and returning residents. The handover arrangements should have featured greater planning and precautionary action in relation to matters such as reduced speed limits, limiting access to local traffic only etc.

Recommendation R4:

That DFES facilitate a workshop involving DFES, WAPF, selected local governments, Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) and other key stakeholders to review and agree on large scale incident management protocols and inter-agency coordination in that regard. Such a workshop should include an exercising element.

In relation to initial recovery phases of the incident, key agencies, both government and non-government, were not brought together to provide services in a coordinated manner. This resulted in a lack of clarity as to the scope of the role of the agencies concerned, creating confusion and duplicated effort.

The time allocated to Shire of Mundaring residents to attend notification interviews at a convenient Shire of Mundaring location to inform/confirm that their home had been destroyed was insufficient. A number of residents and Shire of Mundaring staff were required to travel to City of Swan for a notification interview, which heightened stress levels for the residents concerned.

Further to the preceding point, understanding and accessing the full makeup of services and assistance that could be accessed from government provided assistance (such as DRFA in its multiple categories) through to non-government organisation assistance (such as that made available via Disaster Relief Australia and/or Blaze Aid) was cumbersome for both SoM Recovery staff and affected community members.

The Wooroloo bushfire recovery program is the first instance in which Shire of Mundaring residents have had access to emergency temporary accommodation in the form of the Pods as facilitated by the Minderoo Foundation. The generosity and community mindedness of Minderoo in this regard is commended and greatly appreciated.

The Pod program, however, resulted in extensive effort by Shire of Mundaring to ensure that the Pods could be accommodated on the affected properties, in terms of matters such as water supply and effluent disposal, and in relation to the required statutory approval processes. This was required to be achieved in some haste, as Minderoo had made arrangements direct with property owners outside of any approval process with/through the Shire.

Additionally, a number of Wooroloo residents reside in properties owned by Main Roads WA (MRWA). These residents (and their neighbours) have incurred additional stress due to the unreasonably lengthy processes around the actioning of repairs to their dwellings, water tanks, fencing etc. This is still occurring to date.

The proper coordination of local government and DFES/State resources to best provide for an entire recovery program took some time to form. Initial State Recovery Group meetings were protracted, as all concerned wished to present points of view, plans etc. without there being a rapid and timely identification and activation of immediate priorities and “must do” tasks.

In considering the above matters it is noted that DFES has already facilitated an interim review and has arranged a future further interim review of the State recovery coordination to the Wooroloo bushfire.

In addition, Shire of Mundaring is currently reviewing and redrafting its entire suite of Local Emergency Management Arrangements (LEMA) including the Recovery sub-plan. The Shire will engage with the agencies and individuals with roles in the Wooroloo recovery program and the community in conducting that review.

Recommendation R5:

That Shire of Mundaring progress its review of its existing LEMA and presents the amended/new LEMA to the State Emergency Management Committee and Council for endorsement/approval within 2021.

Recommendation R6:

That DFES State Recovery Coordination, in consultation with key stakeholders unit, continue to periodically review the effectiveness of State recovery coordination and facilitates a comprehensive review of the application of recovery by all agencies involved (as ongoing recovery needs are largely being met within business as usual services).

Terms of Reference Point 4

Consider the effectiveness of the impact assessment processes employed in informing early and timely recovery efforts and consider the effectiveness of the recovery function post response phase.

Good consultation existed between IC and USAR both directly and via ISG meetings in contributing to early indicators of impact assessment.

DFES provided a report of each property impacted by the bushfire, which was provided to the relevant resident during their interview. It is noted however that in some instances the reports of impact were inaccurate. It also appeared that confusion existed within the DFES USAR team as to the actual location of the boundaries of Shire of Mundaring and City of Swan. It is also noted that the exact pattern of development (number of dwellings, identification of dwelling vs outbuilding etc.) on some of the larger rural lots caused difficulties for USAR teams.

Preparation of the “impact assessment” document was cumbersome and overly time consuming. It is felt that it did little to inform recovery. It was only completed some days after recovery had been fully activated.

It was noted that the impact assessment document in its early iterative stages was only made available to local governments after every other agency had viewed it and contributed to it. It is the Shire’s view that this document should be viewed/compiled/shared concurrently in its formation and preparation.

Recommendation R7:

That DFES, in consultation with key stakeholders, review the impact assessment process to provide for a more coordinated and timely compilation of impacts, structured in a manner so as to best inform recovery programming.

The recovery function after the response phase as viewed some seven months from the day of ignition of the Wooroloo bushfire is considered to be effective, enabled by key factors including, but not limited to, the following:

- Community leadership, involvement, planning and active participation in the initial and ongoing recovery program;
- Shire of Mundaring Local Recovery arrangements having been tested by exercising and real time activation, supported by staff and elected members with either dedicated emergency management/recovery roles or experience in undertaking recovery activities through exercising and/or real time activation;
- Shire of Mundaring pre-existing active community engagement program and network;
- Extensive collaboration and coordination of recovery program planning and activation with City of Swan, backed up by long-standing collaboration and consultation between the Shire and City on all aspects of emergency management/recovery;
- The formation and activation of a team of State Recovery Coordination officers from DFES, supported by officers seconded from other agencies working alongside Shire of Mundaring, City of Swan, community and all other key stakeholders; and
- Valuable psycho-social support to the affected community and the recovery program as provided Department of Communities and Red Cross Australia.

Terms of Reference Point 5

Consider the extent, geographic range, method, effectiveness and duration of public warnings.

In relation to the method and noting the extreme demands on initial incident control personnel, the preparation and release of warnings (via DFES) is very onerous. Determining the area to which the warning will be applied is straightforward, but establishing all the supporting information is very time consuming.

Recommendation R8:

That:

- ***A DFES District Officer be rostered throughout the high bushfire threat season to deploy at the earliest opportunity to incident control points to take carriage of this matter; and***

- ***A “draft” warning and suite of supporting information be prepared at a higher remote level for confirmation, acceptance and/validation at the field/incident control point level.***

It is considered that at the community level there was an over reliance on public warning systems, such as that which would be received as a text message on mobile phones, as compared to actively maintaining awareness and access to emergency information sources such as Emergency WA, 720 ABC and local environmental cues/signs (such as seeing or smelling smoke).

Recommendation R9:

That Shire of Mundaring continue to promote via its preparedness programs a heightened and multi-faceted level of bushfire awareness within its community.

Terms of Reference Point 6

Examine the effectiveness of the 'Animal Welfare in Emergencies' program as implemented by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

It is understood that DPIRD staff/others were making requests of field incident management team officers for resources to enable them to enter the fire ground area. Protocols around such requirements should be covered within the plan/arrangements in advance of an incident.

It is also apparent that DPIRD staff concerned were not aware that local government Rangers are authorised under the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* to euthanise animals suffering severe injuries as a result of the bushfire.

A significant issue that was encountered as residents returned to properties impacted by fire (and still persists) is in relation to livestock animals being uncontained due to the destruction of/damage to fencing.

Recommendation R10:

That the animal welfare plan/arrangements be subject to review and the subject of near future comprehensive district/state exercises involving all key stakeholders.

Terms of Reference Point 7

Consider the meteorological aspects of the fire as examined by the Bureau of Meteorology.

The meteorological conditions encountered as at the date and time of the Wooroloo bushfire were generally not inconsistent with that which can be expected to be encountered during summer in Perth and surrounds.

Information supplied by and called from BOM was timely and useful, e.g. spot weather forecasts

Terms of Reference Point 8

Provide a means for members of the public and other interested parties to make submissions to the Review and give these due regard in compiling its report.

Shire of Mundaring promoted the Inquiry via the following media/networks:

- Facebook posts, via the Shire Facebook and Wooroloo Bushfire Community Group Pages;
- Direct Text messages to those residents who have signed up to the Shire TIMS messaging service;
- Wooroloo Connect newsletter;
- Email correspondence with bushfire impacted residents; and
- Shire of Mundaring Volunteer Bushfire Brigade membership via email and through the Bush Fire Advisory Committee.

Terms of Reference Point 9

Consider any other matter that the Review Team identifies in its course of activities.

The effect on overall and continuous incident management effectiveness of the transfer of the IMT from the initial incident control point (Wooroloo Hall) to the Mundaring Arena was a cause for concern for divisional incident commanders.

It is understood that the above transfer resulted in the field IMT operatives having radio difficulties. It is understood that significant areas of Divisional Command East could not be reached.

The *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements – Report 28 October 2020* and the recommendations contained within that report will have significant relevance to matters before, during and after the Wooroloo bushfire.

Recommendation R11:

That the WA Government develop and release a position on the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements – Report 28 October 2020 and recommendations therein.