

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL NATURAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The primary aim of this submission is to demonstrate the need to invest in Indigenous land management, caring for Country and cultural burning practices. Governments across Australia must work in partnership with Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge holders to care for Country, in order to build Australia's resilience to natural disasters, including bushfires. We argue that the most effective way of achieving this is to expand the existing national Working for Country program.

This submission responds primarily to point (g) of the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference which calls for inquiry into "any ways in which the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters". The submission also addresses points (a), (b) and (f) by addressing ways to develop greater national co-ordination around land management and hazard reduction, preparedness for natural disasters, and ways to build resilience to changing climatic conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend the Commonwealth, in conjunction with States and Territories:

1. **expand the Federally funded Working for Country program to support an increase in the number of Indigenous-led Ranger Programs across all State and territory governments to conduct Cultural Burning;**

This will require governments to:

2. fund Traditional Owner groups to develop and apply locally appropriate approaches to land and fire management and to enable reacquisition of cultural knowledge;
3. assess and review legal and administrative barriers restricting access to land and implementation of cultural fire and land management practices;
4. support a long-term public education campaign to change the narrative and understandings of fire, including through schools;
5. coordinate public investment in land management programs and facilitate private sector investment, for example through 'resilience bonds';
6. fund research that will advance the application of Indigenous land practices for reducing risk of catastrophic fires to people and the environment'.

WHAT IS CULTURAL BURNING

Cultural Burning is a part of a broad array of Indigenous Land Management approaches. It is a method of managing Country using fire which has been employed for millennia in Australia. Whilst the Aboriginal nations in Australia are incredibly diverse, cultural management practices are always place-specific and holistic, ensuring the proliferation and protection of all living things on Country. These holistic systems therefore do not allow applications which take them out of their holistic context which is embedded in cultural practice and custom and cannot be separated from its place- and culture-specific foundation. It is for this reason that management practices such as cultural burning must be managed and led by Aboriginal groups whose vast Country-specific knowledges and laws of custodianship ensure the efficacy of these modes of management. It is a method of fire use that varies according to **local Indigenous custom**

and biophysical context. Broadly, Cultural Burning is a holistic approach at landscape management with fire throughout the annual cycle that is based on an intimate understanding of local place and custom, and which is attuned to changes local environmental conditions and cues.

OUR PROPOSAL: IMPLEMENT CULTURAL BURNING ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Recommendation 1: expand the Working for Country program nationally to support the development of Indigenous-led Ranger Programs across all State and territory governments to conduct Cultural Burning.

We propose that the most effective means of implementing a nation-wide Cultural Burning strategy that respects the locally embedded nature of Indigenous land management is via the existing Federally funded Working for Country Ranger Program.

Effective implementation of Indigenous land management to improve Australian preparedness and resilience to natural disasters requires a coordinated national framework that provides accountability through common national standards. Working in partnership with Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge holders to care for Country, including through Cultural Burning and other land management practices, will build Australia's resilience to natural disasters.

CULTURAL BURNING AND BUSHFIRE MITIGATION

Improving Australia's resilience to bushfires requires effective management across the entire landscape. High fuel loads and high connectivity between ground fuels and canopy fuels (the shrub layer), allows fires – which usually start on the ground – to enter forest canopies, resulting in catastrophic and fast spreading bushfires. Cultural Burning has a key role to play in suppressing this shrub layer, thus disconnecting the ground and the canopy fuel loads, providing a significant buffer that improves the resilience of Australia's flammable forest ecosystems to catastrophic climate-driven bushfire disasters **[ToR (g) and ToR (f)(i)]**.

A by-product of the application of local-scale Cultural Burning is a landscape-scale reduction in fuel loads that aids in the mitigation of catastrophic bushfire **[ToR (g)]**. The power of Cultural Burning for reducing the incidence and frequency of catastrophic bushfire is demonstrated most clearly in the results of the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement program, in which Indigenous owned and led Ranger programs worked with government agencies and scientists to develop a highly sophisticated and effective reintroduction of Cultural Burning to a large part of Arnhem Land, subsequently reducing the frequency and magnitude of large bushfires when fuel was a limiting factor **[ToR (g) and ToR (f)(i)]**.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CULTURAL BURNING?

We identify a series of barriers to the implementation of Cultural Burning that form the basis for recommendations 2-6 and which are fleshed out in for in the attached document.

1. Lack of funding for Traditional Owners to exercise knowledge and management;
2. Lack of research or scientific evidence to support Indigenous land practices;
3. Legal and regulatory impediments;
4. Lack of understanding or education about fire;
5. Lack of trust (both ways) between governments and Indigenous knowledge holders;
6. Lack of policy guidance;
7. Funding models.