

How are bush fires managed in NSW?

Ian Brown, 24 January 2020

What goes on behind the scenes when bushfires are marching across the landscape and burning down houses, battled by courageous people in yellow overalls and red trucks? You could easily think that the crews out there on the ground decide strategies and make key decisions. But the activity you see is the ‘tip of the spear’, with a large and complex operation driving it. Here’s a ‘short course’ on NSW fire operations. It’s a bit boring, but if you want to know how what you see happening in fires comes about, then read on...

Legislation

Bushfires in NSW are managed under the [Rural Fires Act 1997](#). This establishes the volunteer-based Rural Fire Service and the role of the RFS Commissioner. It also identifies the cooperative arrangements under which all ‘combat agencies’ work together, being RFS, Fire and Rescue NSW, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation of NSW.

NPWS and Forestry are combat agencies because they are major government bushland managers, together responsible for some 9 million hectares of NSW with major fire management responsibilities.

The RF Act establishes the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, a statewide advisory body, and local Bush Fire Management Committees which coordinate all agencies at the local level through district bush fire management plans.

Cooperation and organisation

RFS and the other agencies manage small fires within their respective zones of responsibility, often with the assistance of other agencies. F&R have defined zones around built-up areas, NPWS manage parks, Forestry looks after state forests and RFS takes the rest, basically. Smaller fires are managed by single agencies, often with help from others.

When a fire reaches a sufficiently serious size or level of threat, or even pre-emptively, the RFS Commissioner can make a declaration under Section 44 of the RF Act. The Commissioner then takes control of the fire over all tenures and appoints an Incident Controller (IC). The IC sets up an Incident Management Team (IMT) near the fire, often at the headquarters of the local RFS district (which correspond to local government areas). IMTs can also be established pre-emptively.

IMTs include many representatives, not just from the combat agencies, but also police, ambulance, State Emergency Service, welfare, local council, road and rail authorities, water agencies, electricity companies, telecoms - whoever is relevant to managing the fire and its consequences.

All recent Blue Mountains fires were under Section 44 declarations. IMTs operated out of Richmond (Hawkesbury LGA), Katoomba (Blue Mountains), Lithgow (Lithgow) and Picton (Wollondilly).

RFS State Operations presides over all from RFS HQ at Homebush. They oversee all operations, resources and aircraft, government liaison, media, public communication, emergency declarations and much more.

Local operations - the IMT

The Incident Controller is usually a senior paid RFS officer, but is sometimes from another agency such as NPWS. In the recent Katoomba IMT, the IC was the Illawarra RFS manager, and the Deputy IC was the Blue Mountains NPWS manager. IMTs usually run 24/7, with two shifts per day.

The larger IMT is set up under the principles of the Incident Control System (ICS), a well-established framework for multi-agency emergency cooperation with three key divisions: operations, planning and logistics. Operations manage communications, the crews on the fireground and fire suppression activities. Planning monitors the fire situation, gathers intelligence and develops strategies and plans. Logistics acquires, supports and tracks people, equipment and supplies. People from all agencies work together across all IMT and field roles.

On the ground, a large fire is divided geographically into divisions and then sections, each with their own field commander. Above it all flies the aerial operation, with Air Attack Supervisors directing aircraft in consultation with field commanders on the ground.

Fireground activities

On-ground actions by crews and aircraft are guided by strategies, divisional plans and sector plans, all produced by the planning team. However ground and aerial teams sometimes have to make their own choices in changing conditions.

Public communication

In Section 44 fires and many others, all media and community information is done by RFS. This includes media briefings, public statements, Fires Near Me, fire updates and so on. This is why you never hear from F&R or NPWS. The RFS media team is large and very effective.

Some benefits and complications

- Cooperative firefighting arrangements are like democracy: not perfect but the best model we have. Each agency brings its special strengths to the task, as well as detailed knowledge of their local 'patches'.
- F&R are specialists in structural firefighting and rescue. RFS are best at vehicle-based firefighting and defending houses. NPWS has the largest and most experienced force of remote area firefighters, plus many of the best air attack supervisors.
- Each agency's perspective on how to manage fires is informed by their particular expertise, experience and resources, and this can lead to tensions within the fire operation.
- Fire suppression, like war, is complex and sometimes chaotic. The situation can be volatile and confusing, with communications and resourcing not always keeping pace with events. This gets worse with big fires and multiple theatres of operation.

NPWS role

Here in the GBMWHHA we have a special interest in the role of NPWS in fires and fire management. That's a huge topic, so just a few points.

- Outside Section 44 declarations, NPWS is responsible for fires and all fire management within conservation reserves. This comes under challenge from certain quarters after every big fire season.
- NPWS prepares fire plans for each park, identifies and carries out mitigation programs, including planned burns, suppresses on-park wildfires, manages the ecological role of fire and assists other agencies in wildfires near parks.
- NPWS manages numerous wildfires on conservation lands every season, many of which never reach the media. Blue Mountains staff spend a significant part of every fire season on fire work, and hence gain substantial experience. In the off-season, they are often engaged in planned fires.
- In Section 44 fires involving conservation lands, NPWS usually fills key roles in the IMT and on the ground, especially in leadership positions, planning teams, air attack and RAFT operations. This is the case in the Blue Mountains. NPWS staff are critical to the effectiveness of these operations, as has often been recognised by the government and RFS.

Some useful web pages:

RFS:

<https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/about-us>

Fire & Rescue NSW:

<https://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/>

Forestry Corporation of NSW:

<https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/>

NPWS fire management:

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/fire/managing-fire>

NPWS fire management strategy 2012-21

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/Fire/living-with-fire-in-nsw-national-parks-strategy-2012-2021-120690.pdf>

Ian Brown spent 20 years with NPWS, worked on more than 100 fires and maintains a lifelong interest in fire management.