

Points about prescribed burning

March 2024

Below are points you can use in talking to Members of Parliament and your friends and colleagues and in letters to the editor. Choose the two or three you find most persuasive and put them into your own words.

There needs to be a full independent review of fire management to examine the role of all the agencies involved and adopt the best science available to underpin policies and practices that will protect and sustain people, property and biodiversity.

The extent and frequency of current prescribed burning in the south-west of Western Australia must be reduced for many reasons.

Current prescribed burning is a threat to biodiversity.

1. The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) says prescribed burns protect biodiversity from wildfires whereas its current prescribed burns can be as bad as, or worse than wildfires, and their harmful impacts are cumulative and interacting.
2. DBCA does not protect long unburnt vegetation although many plants, birds and mammals need such habitat for survival.¹
3. DBCA starts many prescribed burns by dropping incendiaries from aircraft, which allows little opportunity for animals to escape or for patches to remain unburnt within the burn area.
4. DBCA is routinely authorised to injure or kill threatened species of flora and fauna in a prescribed burn.² Its prescribed burns are putting more species at greater risk of extinction.
5. DBCA does not conduct routine fauna surveys before or after prescribed burns so it has no idea how many animals its prescribed burns injure and kill.³
6. Prescribed burns burn out and topple the big old trees with the hollows needed by birds such as cockatoos and owls, leaving them with nowhere to nest and raise their young.
7. There is no independent monitoring or assessment of any of DBCA's prescribed burns.
8. The Conservation and Parks Commission has the job of conducting periodic assessments of implementation of DBCA's management plans, but it has not assessed a departmental prescribed burn since 2006.⁴

Current prescribed burning does more harm than good.

9. Prescribed burns kill the mammals and birds that eat, turn over or rake up flammable vegetation ('fuel'), along with the microbes, insects and fungi that decompose it, and they won't recover if fires are too frequent, so frequent prescribed burning stops natural fuel reduction and drives the demand for more burning.⁵
10. After a fire, the risk of another fire remains low for at most 6 years before peaking and remaining high for 30-40 years then finally subsiding. This means that for fire risk management, long unburned forest is best left unburned.⁶
11. DBCA's annual target of 200,000 hectares to be prescribed burnt every year in the south west forest region encourages burning of large expanses remote from towns and other places in need of protection.
12. The objective of having 45 per cent of the 2.6 million hectares DBCA manages in the South West with a 'fuel age' of less than 6 years drives the 200,000-hectare annual burning target.⁷
13. DBCA's justification for prescribed burning large expanses remote from people and property is that a wildfire there would inevitably reach people and property. This shows it has little confidence in its fire-fighting capacity and in developing and implementing fire management practices that protect biodiversity as well as people and property.

Current prescribed burning is a threat to people's health and lives.

14. The smoke from prescribed burns is bad for people with asthma and other lung diseases and sends many to their doctor or hospital.⁸

15. Between 2002 and 2017 smoke from prescribed burns caused the death of 21 people in WA.⁸
Current prescribed burning poses a risk to property, the economy and climate change.
16. With every prescribed burn there is the risk of escape. DBCA escapes have burnt down dozens of homes⁹ and tens of thousands of hectares of forest and bush, including threatened carbon-storing peatlands.
17. A 2016 amendment to the *Conservation and Land Management Act* means it is unlikely you would get compensation from the Government if an escaped DBCA prescribed burn burnt your home down.¹⁰
18. Prescribed burns damage honey-producing forest and bush and their smoke damages wine grapes so prescribed burning has significant economic costs for beekeepers and wine growers in WA.
19. Between 2002 and 2017, the estimated health-related costs of prescribed fires in WA peaked in 2017 at \$24.1 million.⁸
20. The Government pours money into prescribed burning, and in its annual budget, DBCA spends more on prescribed burning and fire management than on bushfire suppression.
21. Prescribed burns emit large amounts of greenhouse gases,¹¹ a problem ignored by the Government and DBCA.
There are better ways of reducing the risk of wildfires than current prescribed burning.
22. Rapid detection using modern technology and at-source suppression before a small fire becomes a wildfire would provide better protection from wildfire than DBCA's current prescribed burning.
23. Most fires in WA are started by people, legally (prescribed burning, burning green waste, campfires) and illegally (arson and carelessness),¹² so we can reduce the number of fires by encouraging options other than burning, better regulating the use of fire, and doing more to stop arson and other illegal fires.

References

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- ² Authorisation to take or disturb threatened species: Section 40, *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*
- ³ Legislative Council, Question on Notice No. 3232 of 2010; No. 3240 of 2020
- ⁴ Section 19 (g)(iii), *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984*
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- ⁷ Legislative Council, Question on Notice No. 547 of 2015
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- ⁹ Environmental Protection Branch, DFES (2012). Report on – “investigation of the house losses in the Margaret River bushfire 23 November 2011”
- ¹⁰ Section 132, *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984*
- ¹¹ Bennett, LT, Aponte, C, Baker, TG and Tolhurst, KG (2014). Evaluating long-term effects of prescribed fire regimes on carbon stocks in a temperate eucalypt forest. *Forest Ecology and Management* 328, 219–228
- ¹² Legislative Council, Question on Notice No. 1075 of 2022, Tabled Paper 1905 of 2022

Online Links to presentations on the impacts of prescribed burning: Fire & Air Forum 2023 vimeo.com/channels/fireandairforum. Fire & Biodiversity Forum 2021 vimeo.com/channels/fabforum

For further information go to South-West Forests Defence Foundation Inc. website southwestforestsdefence.org and Fire & Biodiversity WA website www.fabwa.org.au