

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Opening address

Kate Smolski

Nature Conservation Council NSW, CEO

Hello, and welcome. I'm Kate, it's very nice to see you all here today. I, too, would like to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to their elders, both past, present and future, and I would like to sincerely thank Uncle Allen Madden for that very warm welcome to country, one that I think is particularly appreciated today, as tomorrow does mark the start of Reconciliation Week here in Australia, so thank you, Uncle Madden. I also would like to thank very much Stuart Midgley for coming and that wonderful informative presentation. I would like to recognise and honour the wonderful close partnership that NCC has with the Rural Fire Service, so, thank you for that.

And I'd like to welcome all of you. It's so wonderful to see how many people are here in the room, and I'd really like to welcome each and every one of you. I'd like to very much welcome the presenters that will be talking to us over the next two days, and I would particularly like to honour the amount of knowledge, and the diverse knowledge that is in this room, and I hope that we get a lot of opportunity over the next two days to learn from one another in this important space. So, thank you so much for coming. I also would like to acknowledge the work, it's my pleasure to really acknowledge the work of the volunteers and the member groups of NCC that have been working with us over so many years in this important bushfire space. I particularly want to mention the NCC Bushfire Management Committee representatives that are in the room today. Thank you so much for your years of work.

If you'll indulge me, I'm just going to quickly tell you a very short story about me and why I'm particularly so glad to be here welcoming all of you and helping to open this conference today. As you might be able to tell from my accent, I'm originally from the United States, and I started my career as a wildlife biologist and worked in the state of Florida, working on the grasslands in that area. My purpose working there was working with our partners to help track and trap and learn more about the threatened species that were living in those grasslands, to help build the case with the agencies that we worked with, that we needed to stop the damaging succession that was happening in that area that was threatening the species, and also to work towards hazard reduction for fire. As that was where I started my career, I'm now very glad to be in this room with people that share those similar values and goals, using bushfire as a means of restoration, as a means of hazard reduction, and as a means of really protecting the important ecosystems that need fire in which to thrive.

As Don mentioned, this is a very historic year for us. NCC is celebrating its 60th anniversary. We also are celebrating our 35th anniversary of the Bushfire Management Program, and 20 years of bushfire conferences, so you are helping us to make history today. As it is mentioned, NCC has a very proud history in bushfire work, and this conference will celebrate that history. Just to give you a little bit of

background, the bushfire program has been active in the fire space since 1979, and it was after the 1992 and 1993 fires that NCC became very actively involved and received funding from 1994, and I'd like to recognise Judy Messer, and John Asquith for really working and driving that forward at that time. Since that time we've run nine biannual conferences, this is, of course the 10th, 78 issue-based workshops, and we continue to provide support to the representatives that sit on the Bush Fire Management Committees throughout New South Wales. And I'd like to take a moment to recognise Rob Palin, who is the current Chair of the NCC Bush Fire Advisory Committee, and recognise all the amazing work that Rob does in this space. So, some of NCC's contributions in the bushfire space include bridging contrasting views in bushfire management, promoting the risk-based approach to bushfire management, and driving the members of the Bush Fire Management Committee and the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee to work together in a two-way exchange of information. We produced a handbook for our Bush Fire Management Committee representatives which the RFS now uses as a model to develop their multi-agency handbook, The Bush Fire Management Committee Handbook.

As you might imagine, in the early days there was some heated debate at all levels including the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, and even in the late 1990s, the environment was not really on the agenda, it was something that had to be fought for. But when the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee started delving deeper into the risk-planning pathway, it became clear that good fire-management policy and practice could include both effective risk mitigation and positive environmental-management outcomes, and those two things did not have to be mutually exclusive. Over the last 10 years there has been a very significant evolution, all the agencies now cooperating well, and bushfire management for the most part is a collaborative activity with all agencies pulling their weight and sharing their strengths. It is incredibly important that this continues, because bushfire management is everyone's responsibility, not just that of the fire-fighting agencies such as the Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue New South Wales, though we clearly do honour the work that they do. But we are much stronger when we work together. I would also like to acknowledge that the NCC bushfire reps have played a critical role in helping to foster and maintain this positive situation.

Now, this conference aims to build on previous conference themes, so for those of you that have been present at our conferences in the past, that's wonderful, for those of you that have not, I'm sure that you'll get very much out of the next couple of days. So, our conference four themes are: Why do we need to use bushfire for restoration, and how does it link with risk management? What does using fire for restoration mean for different groups, including ecologists, Councils, Aboriginal communities, farmers, fire agencies, regeneration teams, Local Land Services, National Parks and others? How are people currently implementing fire for restoration, and what would they like to be doing? This will include practical and logistical aspects of ecological burns, challenges faced and positive outcomes achieved. And then, where to, from here? How can knowledge be developed and distributed? How can confidence in using fire be built? What gaps need to be addressed in this space? And how can strengthening of our networks help?

I'd like to just take a quick minute, you heard quite a bit about the NCC/RFS Hotspots Program from Stuart, so thank you very much for that detail. I'd like to highlight three of the other main projects that are part of NCC's Healthy Ecosystems Program, the Hotspots Project being one of the major ones. These projects all work towards rehabilitation of degraded landscapes, restoration of ecological integrity, and reinstating resilience into the environment and communities. So, our three other projects are: The

Upper Coldstream Project, which is centred in the Upper Catchment of the Coldstream River at the eastern edge of the Clarence River Floodplain, and is implementing habitat restoration works across this nationally-significant region, by combining capacity-building opportunities that engage and empower landholders to deliver the best practice landscape skill management.

I'd also like to mention the Bushfire program, of course, which promotes ecologically sound fire management policy and planning through its statutory role on fire management committees in New South Wales, including the Rural Fire Service Advisory Council, the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, and by supporting NCC representatives on Bush Fire Management Committees, in writing submissions and participating on panels and helping to share their knowledge.

And I'd like to mention the Firesticks Project, which aims to reinvigorate the use of cultural burning by facilitating cultural learning pathways. Firesticks works with Indigenous communities and government agencies to integrate contemporary and Aboriginal fire practices to protect and enhance wildlife habitat and Indigenous cultural values, and I'd like to just take a moment to recognise all of the NCC staff here in the room today, working on those different projects, also the Hotspots Project and all of their diligent work in this space.

So, in closing, I would like to again thank our sponsors very much, our Platinum sponsors, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, the Office of Environment and Heritage, and Travers Bushfire and Ecology. I also would like to recognise our Gold sponsor, the Fire and Rescue New South Wales. Your generous contributions have made this conference possible, so thank you so much. I also would very much like to thank the team that brought the conference together, and particularly the volunteers here today, and thank all of you for attending. I'd particularly like to recognise Michelle Rose and Stefanie Pillora for all of the excellent work they have put in, in bringing us here today. So, thank you very much, and enjoy the conference.