

## Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

### Community Resilience for Aboriginal Communities Project

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[Link to slides](#)

Before I start I'd just like to acknowledge the traditional owners and elders past, present and future and thank them for making us so welcome while we're here. A brief overview of the BRAC Project I'm calling it BRAC because the Rural Fire Service is great with shortening everything up to make it sound easy, but it stands for Bushfire Resilience for Aboriginal Communities. It started off looking at 34 discrete communities that weren't right in villages or towns and we looked at the risks involved with fire impacting upon those villages and communities and a fairly detailed review was done and a report made up with recommendations on how to protect the communities from the impact of fire. Some of the risks were high, some down to low but as you can see in this image (slide 3) we've got some extreme risks like these houses that we had to deal with. The second part of the project which I managed was actually to implement the recommendations from the risk assessment.

We can look at some of the things that we came up against, this is Crescent Head (slide 4) east of Kempsey and as you can see that's an extreme risk for those that, those communities. We spent a fair bit of money mitigating fire around a lot of these communities across the state and this is the same house (slide 5) but looking from further back. So that might look fairly drastic but to make those houses safe we had to go that far in to it.

It risk levels went from there to some of the villages like this one, this is Namina at Wellington (slide 6), and it was quite good. We've set up some asset protection zones there that the local districts are maintaining from now on with consultation with the Local Land Council which is now attending all the bushfire management committees meetings. We also did up fire preparation maps for the different villages, this is one for Quambone (slide 7), west of Coonamble and as you can see there's resident preparation zones, asset protection zones and strategic fire advantage zones out from those with the recommendations on the right hand side on how to protect it and who's responsible for them. We also worked on improving water supplies (slide 8).

Well this was all very good doing this but we were looking at how, it didn't suit the name of the project, resilience. We weren't handing the resilience back to the local district, to the local communities. How we were going to hand resilience back to the local communities was a stumbling block that I was trying to get over. I thought well everything we're doing here is what our local district should have been doing anyway, because they're all part of the community, they're all little discrete communities in their own right but part of the whole community that we're supposed to be protecting. So I thought, well we're doing a job that we should be doing anyway, so the project started to branch out into some other areas like cultural burning. This photo is taken up at Yarrowarra, Jamie mentioned Yarrowarra earlier, this is a

burn that we did there, this is before the burn (slide 9). And this is after the burn (slide 10). As you can see it's taken out a lot of the ground cover but it hasn't even touched the leaves that are only about less than 30 cm off the ground. It's a very cool burn, it's gone through there, there's still a lot of vegetable matter on the ground itself but from our perspective it's taken out the fire danger from that area and also culturally and ecologically it's done a great job.

Once we started doing these sort of things we started to realise that it's already going on across the state. We already had a partnership with the Local Land Services the old Lachlan CMA, so we've expanded on that with training for the members of the communities that are involved in those areas. Not just in that project but a lot of other projects as well and we've gone from there. We've been offering fire protection, providing personal protective equipment for the burns and supporting Local Land Services with their project. This image was taken at Murrin Bridge Lake Cargelligo (slide 11) you can see our local brigade captain at the back with the hat on, one of the community members at the front with the blue PPE on, and Victor wearing his normal PPE, a t-shirt. I think he actually had Crocs on that day so he's probably well ahead of what he normally wore. So that was, that was one of the great days that we had in the, what we were trying to achieve. This is also the same day, another well bred young bloke there with Victor, that's my brother (slide 12). It went really well. That was a couple of the other fellows, Woolly and Rich there and Vern having a great time (slide 13). We were happy with that day with the support the BRAC Project could offer with the cost of some of the PPE, organising the local brigades and sorting out some local issues with some of our district staff that might have been slightly recalcitrant to start with but have come around.

I'll touch more on that point actually as that was a big part of the project. It wasn't actually engaging the Aboriginal communities was our challenge – they were great to work with, they were very receptive to what we were trying to do and they thought it was a great idea. Communities were especially keen when we started to combine this work with traditional burning, handing back the ownership of the fire protection to their own districts and everything. The biggest hurdle we had was actually dealing with some of our staff because of old perceived reasons why they shouldn't. After we actually had a few meetings dragged them, dragged them along to the meetings and sat down with them, they realised "Oh this isn't so bad after all," and they realised that it was quite easy. It turned out after a while it just grew like a mushroom. We worked with 34 communities and then it came to a point where communities started ringing us, "Can you help us with this? Can you train some people in this?" and what we did. Luckily we had the project funding so we we've actually trained now 60 plus I think across the state. These are Indigenous members of the different communities that aren't members of the Rural Fire Service, we had a bit of a sticking point with the districts for that day saying "Oh, but they've got to be members before we can train them", so well we trained them but we got the qualifications issued through TAFE and we paid for that through the project. We've got now got 60 additional fire fighters across the state. That was a full bush fire fighter course too, not just bush fire awareness. That was a great success and a lot of those people are now starting to actually join the RFS, so we picked up membership as well as engaging the communities.

Bush Fire Management Committee training was one of the biggest things we also had to achieve during the project to give the ownership of the fire resilience back to the communities. As a land manager the Local Land Councils should have input into the decisions that were being made about the area. So we flew nearly 45 members of different Land Councils from across the state down to Sydney and trained

them in what a Bush Fire Management Committee does, what it can achieve and what the communities can get out of the training (slide 14). This was in conjunction with the NSW Land Council and since the training we've had a really, really good attendance rate now at our Bush Fire Management Committee because of that training.

Community involvement was an important part of the project. This is Jamie there I think lining up with a bit of bark in his hand too, he was talking about earlier (slide 15). The level of community involvement with the cultural burning and the training and involvement of the local community members has been a really rewarding to be part of the whole project. At Bellbrook we installed a community fire unit in the village with a pump, stand pipes, hoses (slide 16), so they've got some protection and if they actually run into a fire before the fire brigade gets here they have got some protection that they can use.

The rangers we trained at Yarrowarra (slide 17) had a great time. Their training was over a full week. They were all rangers from the Firesticks project across the north of the state which Richard and Oli and Waminda had a fair bit to do with and this work has been really good.

So there's some more of the Rangers at Ngulingah at Lismore (slide 19), Cabbage Tree at Wardell, and as I said before engaging our local staff in the same sort of process at the same time. We've also initiated cultural awareness training for all of our staff (slide 23-24) - it's going to be over a four year period. We've done four training periods this year already in different areas of the state, Wiradjuri area, Kamilaroi and up the north coast and a few, and another one on Thursday up in the Blue Mountains. Some final images from the project here is some fire training with some Wiradjuri fellows from West Wyalong (slide 25-26). We instigated some Neighbour Safer Places like this one at Namina in Wellington (slide 27). To bring it all together we actually won a Resilient Australia award late last year for the project (slide 28). This award really belongs to the communities because they're the ones who got involved and helped us win that, so that's been great.

### **Questions from the audience**

**Q** - Thanks Dave for that presentation. I'm just interested that you were talking about Victor wearing his usual attire and that issue of community being on a fire ground either with or without a PPE, whether there are children present or not. There's still this fear this underlying fear of fire and exposure to fire under those cool burning conditions. It's something that we need to address and whether regulations are going to prohibit or are allow. Aboriginal people don't necessarily want to be members of the RFS, they want to do cultural burning. How did you deal with those when it came down to the crunch?

**DC** - We didn't pressure anyone to join at all, we gave them that option if they wanted to join in the RFS but if they didn't we still trained them through the project because we had funding for that so we could. If they chose, after they'd been trained to join later on well we just convert those competencies across to our qualification and they're right. As far as wearing PPE at these burns, anyone we trained we wanted them to wear it because we had a duty of care, we've trained them in the fire fighting and we were initiating some of the burns. When it came to that one at Murrumbidgee we were just asked to be there to assist for fire protection after initial talks and things, so this was a different thing. It was up to community whether they decided to wear PPE. The only person that wasn't wearing it was Victor but he never does. Everyone else wore some sort of PPE while we were there that day. They had the option, we had it with us so if they wanted to wear it they could. There's also a community fire unit within Murrumbidgee and they borrowed some of the PPE out of that. With this project I tried to common sense a lot more than bureaucracy, so I got asked where's all you tangible evidence of what you've done

in the project, i.e. big thick reports and stuff well yeah, I haven't got any. I just had to take them around and show them the communities I suppose.

**Q** - I know it depends on the circumstance but in general if you had a choice between doing mechanical hazard reduction and putting in a cool burn, what would you choose?

**DC** - Oh cool burn for sure, yeah.

**Q** - My question is of a similar vein. I'm just wondering how you dealt with the different objectives between a cultural burn and an asset protection burn. My understanding is an asset protection burn, you know the benefits may only last 12 months before the following summer you're going to need to burn again, which is not going to be in keeping with a cultural burn. How do you deal with those?

**DC** - Yeah, that's true, most of the assets protection zones we had around these villages were actually set up to protect those assets and the lives of the people in them. So that's why that very first one we had at Crescent Head looked to be a fairly hard APZ, it was mainly because it had to be otherwise those houses would have been undefendable in a fire. The actual cultural burning, they were usually done further out from the APZ usually in a strategic fire advantage zones or even further out. We were doing them out there, not actually right against the villages doing protection there.

**Q** - Can I just ask what would you think would be a good number of semi-unskilled, like newly trained people on those fires like that one at Murrumbidgee if you had say two trucks and ten trained rural fire service staff, how many people could they sort of functionally deal with who are assisting or actually running the show?

**DC** - As many as they like. There's no safety issues at all. We're talking about flame height would be lucky to be 50 or 60 millimetres. It trickled around; it took all day to burn about five hectares. It was very safe and it achieved exactly what it was trying to do, which is take out the barley grass which it did. I think, you're never going to get huge numbers anyway, so if you needed, if you want to have 20 you probably could. How many were there Michelle, you reckon?

**Michelle Hines** - We had about 10. We've actually been there twice and we had children, we had everybody. The way we worked the fire wasn't, it was very safe. I think out of that there was probably two proper fire people, then just the rest of us.

**DC** - These are really low, low intensity and is got to be the right time of the year.

**Q** - I don't notice any women in any of those photos. Now the RFS has a lot of women in it. And I'm just wondering whether you have tried to attract Aboriginal women to be part of these processes because then they could burn the women's areas and the men could burn the men's areas?

**DC** - For sure, in all the IPAs there's quite a few of women. In those photos of the training at Yarrawarra, there were about 30 % were women I suppose in that course. Jamie you might be able to answer how many.

**Jamie Bertram** - Yeah that'd be right Dave. There's probably 30 % and the women did a better job than the lads actually, in some cases. They were getting amongst it. We've got a fairly significant site at the southern end of the Coffs Harbour airport where it's a traditional women's site. It's a spiritual site so there's no real artefacts. It's more of a dreaming area and a meeting place for the women to talk and yarn. So when we were approached by the Land Council to do some burning there we wanted women

to actually implement fire there and they wanted to be part of that. So we've engaged women from Ranger teams basically from as far as Lismore, Ballina, Casino to come down. Richie has spoken to the women and they want to come and they spend time on country actually burning. There's quite a push for more women to get involved in that because that's part of their culture as well, women always did light fire.

**Q** - You talked about training and training the community. In all your conversations at higher levels are there any plans to actually have basic training and to give back the power to the communities so they can do all the preparation works, burn plans etcetera?

**DC** – Yes that would be the ideal thing to end up having happen. Our Indigenous policy is being rewritten at the moment, to try to address some of these things that we've fallen down on over the years. So hopefully in the next few years we can remedy that. We'd like to get communities more involved with the RFS so we can actually provide the training for free and go from there. That's a good point and yes we are working toward that.