



FIRE MANAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN TOP END

Introduction

The Western Top End area is a complex area with multiple land tenure, land-use objectives and stakeholder interest groups. It has suffered in the past few decades from a poor fire history with regular damaging late dry season bushfires and has limited dedicated resourcing for fire management. Fire is an essential feature of the Top End region for natural and cultural management activities, infrastructure protection, wildfire mitigation and landscape health. Whilst there are differing aspirations around fire management throughout the region, the overall objective of fire management in this region is to implement a fine-scale patch mosaic across the landscape. This aims to improve vegetation condition, biodiversity quality and provide cultural knowledge transfer and economic benefits.

Background and Motivation

The challenge is that multiple interest groups have different fire objectives and in different contexts (i.e. peri-urban areas, cattle stations, Aboriginal land, cultural sites and National Parks). This project aims to integrate these interests through fostering collaboration and supporting on-ground action through cross tenure fire management planning and activities.

In April 2016, TNRM supported and assisted in strategic planning and implementation of prescribed burns in the Western Top End Region. A two-day Western Top End fire meeting (coordinated by TNRM, Northern Land Council and Bushfires NT), was held at Nauiyu Community, Daly River.



Photo: Participants met early in the season to plan the early dry season activities.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Established a Collaborative fire management group

7000KM² area under fire management

1800KM in burn lines

18 Helicopter Hours for aerial burning

6 Aboriginal Rangers trained in aerial fire techniques

Activities

To ensure effective and strategic fire management TNRM engaged Firestick Pty Ltd to facilitate and coordinate Western Top End fire management in 2016. The facilitator assisted in planning and logistics for aerial burning, facilitated communication between ranger groups and pastoral neighbours; provided training and support for aerial burning and assisted with data collection. The facilitator concentrated on groups with lower fire management capacity and



Western
Top End
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worked in close collaboration with NLC and TNRM while supporting Wardaman and Wagiman rangers, and Peppiminarti and Emu Point Communities to achieve regional fire outcomes.

“By burning earlier in 2016 we did better in terms of created the desired patch mosaic. There are challenges in this region as there are lots of neighbours and sorting out of agreements with landholders and leaseholders.”

Ben Lewis, Fire Stick and Associates

Outcomes

Analysis of fire scar mapping from 2016 indicates there was a significant reduction in hot, late dry season fires in 2016. According to stakeholders this is directly due to greater collaboration and coordination of effort. In conducting effective fire management it is essential to be vigilant in establishing fire breaks and ensuring early burning is well planned and implemented. Having funding available from TNRM for aerial burning helped ensure that the early burning program was implemented in order to prevent the large scale destructive late dry season burns that have occurred in previous years.

Despite this improvement, the post season fire review meeting held in October, 2016, focused on lessons learnt and how we can adapt our management approaches striving for improvement for the 2017 year. It was recognised that there were still some big blocks of late fire and overall still too much of the area was burnt (approx. 50% and aiming for around 30-40%) and there should be less than 10% burnt by late season fire.

A number of strategies to increase collaboration with key Government and Pastoral stakeholders and improving efficiency of preventative approaches were identified as key to preventing these fires next year.

It was also recognised that grassy weeds such as Gamba grass (*Andropogon gayanus*) makes fire management more challenging. It is therefore important to implement an integrated approach to weeds and fire in the region.

The Future

Whilst acknowledging that 2016 has seen a great improvement in fire management in the Western Top End, stakeholders are committed to continue to strengthen their collaboration and improve these efforts. It was acknowledged that formalising a broader community landholder/TO input into fire planning was important for the region. A comprehensive fire management planning meeting for next year is planned for April 2017 with clear objectives to include stakeholders that have not been engaged to date. It is strongly recognised that effective fire management requires vigilance and ongoing management. It is especially important to have all stakeholders on-board and contributing to fire management planning and implementation.



Photo: Participants met in Pine Creek to review the 2016 fire season and importantly to adapt next year's approach

Acknowledgements

This case study was prepared by Territory Natural Resource Management.

Territory Natural Resource Management acknowledges the contribution of; Northern Land Council, Bushfires NT,

This project is supported with funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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