

DRAFT POINT HENRY FIRE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Submission from John McAleer

Climate and meteorological data

Although the south coast region is described as Mediterranean it would be more appropriate to use the term Temperate Mediterranean or in fact Modified Temperate Mediterranean to describe the Point Henry Peninsula. We do not experience hot dry summers. Dry, yes, particularly this year. Normally some rain is experienced but that is often accompanied by thunderstorms.

The temperatures experienced on the peninsula are in fact quite low throughout the summer period. Days over 40F are very rare and days over 30F are uncommon. It should be noted that the peninsula is often cooler by several degrees than areas only a few kilometres to the north.

The data used in the draft report was obtained from a site in the Wellstead area and, while similar, is not an accurate representation of the Point Henry climate.

I am of the view that given the farming, fishing (both commercial and recreational) and tourism industry in this area it would be appropriate for Council to pursue the establishment of a remote weather station at Bremer Bay. There is a long stretch of coast without a station while some towns in WA appear to have two observation points.

Accurate and timely data on winds particularly direction changes, temperatures, pressure changes and humidity would assist firefighters and residents in decision making.

Characterisation of Point Henry as “extreme”

To the best of my knowledge there have been two fires on the peninsula in recent years. The first in 1996 burnt out an area of bush and the second in 2002 swept through a large area including multiple sub divisions.

The first fire was accidentally lit and resulted in no injury or significant structural damage.

The second fire was ignited by a lightning strike. Much of the area burnt had a forty year fuel buildup and therefore high fuel load levels. Again, to the best of my knowledge, there were no injuries and minimal structural damage.

Comparing the criterion at 5.3 in the draft against the factual data from the above fires the likelihood on Point Henry falls between Possible and Likely. The factual consequence in both fires was Insignificant.

The resultant Bush Fire Risk derived from Table 5 Risk Matrix is at best, low and at worst medium.

Do I have complete faith in this result? The comparison is based on fact rather than guess work or any form of bias. However I spent around \$1,000 this year on an ongoing program of fire defence enhancement. That suggests I am not convinced.

Equally I am not convinced by the classification derived from 5.2 The Bush Fire Hazard. It appears that the classification scale of low, moderate, extreme is a politically modified scale resulting from major fires and seems to have been influenced by political imperatives. The former scale had a more realistic low, moderate, high, extreme range. As far as I can establish, other jurisdictions use this scale and overseas a classification of very high also seems to be included. This is more consistent with the term "extreme" which means at the extremity of a range.

To put into perspective, this would rate Point Henry alongside the Darling escarpment which has high temperatures, high speed katabatic winds, very steep terrain, low humidity, much more dangerous vegetation and is heavily populated. Having lived on the escarpment one decision did not have to be contemplated, it was flee not fight.

To take this line of argument further an examination of the Victorian alpine areas raises the fire risk by a further order.

In looking at the risk and consequence of fire at Point Henry we can make a reasonable assessment that it is high but clearly is not close to the nationally recognized extreme areas.

There appear to be a variety of views on the difficulty of firefighting on Point Henry. Opinions range from those broadcast during the 2012 fire through to those of volunteer and veteran professional firefighters experienced in mountainous terrain and forest regions.

Fire Safe Areas for Firefighters

The current proposal includes the establishment of two neighbourhood safe areas by enhancement of the Short Beach and Blossoms sites. The Short Beach location would require considerable clearing to be suited to such a purpose.

I propose that consideration be given to an expansion of this concept to provide a number of safe areas for firefighters such that they are never further from a haven than a specified driving time. The peninsula is not large and a travel time of perhaps two minutes in operationally acceptable directions could be achievable.

The two proposed neighbourhood beaches together with current and proposed water tank sites and the Marina provide seven locations. To these could be added sites at the end of Point Henry Road and Black Rocks Road. This provides coverage in east, west and central areas. These may not, on inspection be the optimum locations but that could be established subject to trial timings and of course availability of the sites.

Something like a 50m x 50m clearing, radiation fenced and with a water tank may be a cost effective option though experts could no doubt establish specifications

Fire Ignition

In 2013 there were 1600 fires deemed to have been deliberately lit in WA. It is estimated that between 50% and 75% of all WA fires were deliberately lit, a significant number accidental and a small number by natural causes (lightning). Recent statistics indicate a trend to higher percentages of deliberate fires.

None of the above causes of ignition to bush can be prevented. The most common cause, deliberate, can be influenced only at the margins. As this cause represents the majority of fires even marginal impact should be pursued.

The use of dramatic and “inflammatory” language such as that used in the ill considered public statements during the 2012 fire should be avoided. The suggestion of placing a sign at the entry to the Point Henry peninsula declaring the area “extreme” would not, I suggest, be acceptable to the vast majority of residents. It is not in our interest to draw the further attention of potential arsonists to this area.

The second most common cause of ignition is accidental. This cannot be eliminated but there are already various mechanisms (fire bans etc.) and programs (electricity pole replacement etc.) in place to reduce the frequency of these occurring. I believe that a sign at the entry point to Point Henry stating that the area is a fire risk area and that no camp fires for any purpose or burning of rubbish is permitted during the fire season. Further I would make the strong point that offenders would be prosecuted and no warnings issued.

Clearly the relatively infrequent lightning strikes can only be addressed by heightened awareness and preparedness when thunderstorm conditions are forecast or observed, including by radar.

Early Warning

Critical to surviving a bushfire is early warning. This can provide the time to leave the area with maximum safety or, to those who choose to stay and defend, adequate time to deploy their active defence measures.

Current alerting systems are limited by mobile coverage and the lack of universal mobile use. I strongly believe that a siren system should be established for both Point Henry and the Bremer Bay township. This may require more than two sirens remotely activated. Even visitors would be alerted if they heard a siren.

The use of police cars running around town with sirens on could only be used under certain circumstances and is ad hoc at best.

Longest possible lead time is a critical factor.

Fire Protection Areas

There are a wide range of views on the mandating of Fire Protection Areas. In some cases there is total opposition to the use of such areas. Others are concerned that a blanket approach of one size fits all is inappropriate as house construction can be so diverse in terms of passive fire defence.

I am happy with the general concept of such areas and have applied these principles from day one. I do however have a strong objection to one aspect of these areas. I am fortunate to have large Peppermint trees around my house and have encouraged their growth. I consider them an essential part of my passive fire defence. Having obtained information on " Living Shields" from various sources I have a clear area around my house then large peppermints (cleared below) and a cleared area beyond.

In 2002 the fire went straight through our block while we were out, ie. undefended. A fire crew had been at the house before the fire came through and activated our sprinklers. We were escorted back in after the fire front had passed.

The burn pattern was clearly defined with 6.5 acres of burnt out trees and ash. The windward side of the large peppermints were slightly burnt but green on the house side. Everything beyond the peppermints was gone, everything on the house side including posts, plants and vegetables were green. The sprinklers did not reach the area between the house and the trees. There was a burn shadow to the lee of the house with fires burning back against the wind towards the house, the unburnt area was small and these were easily extinguished. In discussion with the consultant he had a similar experience.

As a few of our trees are inside 20m, and the crests are not 10m apart, strict compliance with the protection area would require removal of some trees. This would reduce the passive defence and therefore safety of our house.

Other Points for Consideration

An increase in the cleared road verges to 20m on all roads is achievable and may assist where roads are used as strategic fire breaks.

Wellstead Road and Blackrocks Road could be joined to increase access/egress.

An inventory of active and passive measures employed by residents could be collated, checked for validity and distributed to all residents. There are bound to be some things which have not been thought of by everyone that could be employed to benefit. A couple of examples could be gas masks and personal radiation shields.

In the 2012 fire a small number of residents formed a limited uhf network.

Probably not viable but putting the main power line on the peninsula underground could prolong supply to those sub divisions with underground power.

Rostering of crews from Point Henry for water bombing activities needs to recognize the likelihood that they may not be available if there is any threat to the peninsula.

Personal Fire Plan

This year we have reviewed our personal fire plan. Previously we worked on wetting down the vegetation to the limit of our fire hoses and working back to the house. We purchased a Thermo-gel kit this year and would now start with coating the house and surrounds then working outwards to the native bush. This followed by using water only to the limit of our hoses. Other actions remain unchanged.

We are due to repaint the outside of the house this year and the small amounts of timber we have will be stripped back and undercoated with intumescent paint.

There would, I imagine, be various other products which may be useful.

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