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Title: **Island Fires:
A community planning the way forward**

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Island Fires
A community planning the way forward

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Changing policy and practice over the years have impacted heavily on the Islands ability to prepare for and manage wildfires. The outcome was the enormity of the 2007 December fires when 20% of the Island was burnt in 10 days. The community is demanding change.

Kangaroo Island – Setting the scene

Kangaroo Island lies to the south of Adelaide, 15 km off the tip of the Fleurieu Peninsula. It is the third largest Australian Island, 55 kms wide and 155 kms long, with a land mass of 4,400 square kms and a unique and spectacular coastline stretching nearly 500kms.

The Island is home to a small resident population of 4,300 people, with agriculture, tourism and fisheries the main economic drivers. Agriculture is based on the production of wool, prime lamb, beef, and cereals, but has diversified over recent years to include a vast array of value added products including cheese, wine, marron, Ligurian honey, olive oil, abalone and forestry to name a few. The Island attracts over 160,000 tourists a year, with 30% being internationals. The majority of visitors to the Island come during the Fire Danger Season, with over 40,000 visiting during December and January. The unique environment, pristine wilderness, remoteness and the 'Island' appeal adds to the fascination and KI is fast becoming one Australia's premier wildlife and wilderness destination.

One third of the Island is under the care and management of the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) and features 28 protected areas, which is by far the highest proportion of protected area tenure held in any South Australian region. In total over 40% of the Island remains under native vegetation which also includes roadsides, private ownership and private heritage areas. The Island has the largest area of intact ecosystems and the largest number of endemic species in any region in the state and is abundant in wildlife, due in part to the absence of predators, as the Island is free from both rabbits and foxes. The community is strongly committed to protecting and managing this unique environment, for both locals and visitors alike and boasts of the many awards recognising this.

A unique fire history

This extraordinary and unique environment is both spectacular and highly volatile. The Island's fire history is also unique in its frequency and ferocity and is the only region in South Australia that can boast a major campaign fire almost every year for the last twenty years. Records show 31 campaign fires since 1985, culminating in the December fires last year and in the loss of 90,000 hectares. The major cause of ignition by far has been lightning strikes at 54.8%, followed by rekindles or burn offs at 19.3%. During this time, 3 of our coastal settlements have been repeatedly threatened, and since 2001, one of our major parks, Flinders Chase has had 4 separate fires, and 98.9% or 73,000 hectares of that area has burnt in this time.

The statistics are frightening, as is the ferocity of our fires. Mainland fire fighters who are unused to KI wildfires are unprepared for this intensity in our fire behaviour, and even senior officers with many years experience regularly comment "we have never seen anything like it". Our fuel loads are significant, and are often recorded at levels unheard of on the mainland. These are the result of a number of factors, but a significant one is the lack of rabbits and as such an intact understorey. The isolation factor also is significant in the eventual impact of the Island fires. The first response to a fire in the Adelaide Hills is often a water bomber, and control is quick and effective with the support of ground crews. In comparison a lightning storm over the Island can start more fires than we have CFS appliances.

The impact of changing policy and practice over the years

Islanders by their very nature are resourceful and adaptable people. Over the time of European settlement, they have managed the risks associated with their remote existence, including the ever present risk of wildfire. They were skilled in scrub fire, which they used in the clearance of land, but also to minimise fire risk, and to maintain the biodiversity of their remaining native vegetation. The impact of the Native Vegetation Act in 1985 was significant to the Island. While it provided protection for the remaining native vegetation, it also deemed fire to be clearance. Over the ensuing 20 years, the use of fire as a management tool has been minimal, the skills almost lost and a landscape and community left in part at risk. The Native Vegetation Regulations 2005 contain a comprehensive suite of exemptions for fire management practices, but still require multi layer approvals, and the same level of application and reporting is required for all areas of the landscape whether urban, rural or wilderness.

The policy and management of the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) over the years has impacted heavily on the defendability of our many Parks, neighbouring landscapes and the community. The Island has paid a high price for the many years of what is seen as irresponsible behaviour in failing to maintain appropriate fire management practices within Parks. Government policy, minimal resourcing and personal mindset have all played a part in the past, and all three will need to change as we move forward.

The Kangaroo Island Council has also been unable to appropriately resource Fire Prevention activities as mandated under the Fire and Emergency Services Act. This is true of many Regional Councils in South Australia. A part time officer had been charged with the responsibility of both planning and compliance and had received minimal resources to achieve any real outcomes. Financial limitations have been, and continue to be, a major component of Councils lack of support.

The Outcome...the enormity of the December fires

On December 6th 2007, a dry thunderstorm moved across Kangaroo Island throughout the afternoon. By nightfall 14 fires had started, 5 were contained within hours, and two more in the next 48 hours. Of the remainder, some joined together, and the Island fought 4 major fires for the next 10 days. 1400 personnel from 17 different agencies from every state in Australia came to our aid, to help us defend our community. 150 appliances, 17 aircraft, including an Erickson Air Crane were utilised, and a makeshift airstrip near Flinders Chase was “never without a plane either landing or taking off”. The Salvation Army at the height of the fire was serving 2000 meals a day, the biggest operation they have ever mounted. Tent city appeared on the Parndana Oval, the School became a CFS site, and their buses became CFS buses. The local CFS members didn’t go home but slept on the oval as well. The community filled the gaps, and held their breath. SAPOL closed all major roads and all areas associated with the fires, and access was limited to the towns of Penneshaw, Kingscote and American River on the Northern coast. Tourism all but ceased.

The outcome was a total of 90,892 hectares destroyed, 14,298 hectares was private land, mainly farms including stock, crops, fencing and valuable pasture feed and 76,594 hectares was public land.

One young life was lost.

There are many remarkable aspects to this fire, many facts and figures, and many stories that will be told in Fire Stations around the country. Two particular elements stand out. For all but 2 days, these fires burnt under mild weather conditions, and yet the fire behaviour, rate of spread, flame heights and spotting were more typical of extreme weather conditions. The second is the success of the fire fighting efforts to limit the impact to one third of the Island. The efforts by our fire fighters in containing these fires cannot be understated, as

they succeeded against all odds. The possibility, indeed the probability of these fires destroying a far greater area and risking whole communities was very real. The extreme fire behaviour and the complexity of fighting 4 campaign size fires at once in a remote region was a recipe for disaster. Add to this, communities that were undefendable, and large tracts of volatile vegetation on Parks, on roadsides and on farms that contained huge fuel loads. If a period of extreme weather had occurred, the result would have been catastrophic. We were lucky, very lucky, and unfortunately it had nothing to do with well planned and well resourced prevention and preparedness.

Seizing the opportunity for change

As we moved from response to recovery, the initial focus was on the immediate needs of individuals, families and businesses that had been directly impacted by the fires. The State Recovery Office extended expertise, support and funding to assist, as the impacts became clear. The effects extended further than the boundaries of the fire, as the impact on the Island's Tourism Industry was real and crippling. Sensational media reports were our second "fire" and it would take many months, and a significant and costly marketing effort by the South Australian Tourism Commission, Tourism KI and local businesses to overcome the damage.

Through this post fire period one major issue to arise was that of fire prevention, native vegetation regulations and the management of Parks. The community was rightfully angry, and the anger was building. This was not the first campaign fire, or even the second or third. This was the 31st in the last 20 years, and this one had destroyed one third of their region. Their homes, families, and livelihoods were once again at risk, but at a new and frightening scale. It was time to demand change, to allow the Island community to plan and prepare for future events, using their knowledge and expertise in planning for prevention and preparedness.

The Island community understands the volatility of their environment, and that these fires will continue. The change needed is the ability to defend and protect, and to minimise the impact on the environment through good planning and adequate resourcing. We need to encourage people to create a defensible space around their homes, rather than put barriers in their way. Avenues are needed for appropriate fuel reduction burning in parks, roadsides and on private property to allow a better balance between the protection of life and property and biodiversity management. The loss of entire parks, such as Flinders Chase is not acceptable, and the fire management systems within DEH need urgent and appropriate resourcing.

Towards a more defensible future

During 2007, the KI Bushfire Prevention Committee decided to undertake a review of the District Plan. The fires raised the expectations of the community for a change in the current planning approach and this presented the opportunity to utilise their heightened awareness to maximise their participation and their influence on the plan. It was the vehicle to give the community the voice they were asking for, and to utilise their skills and knowledge.

The process was also the opportunity to effect change, to build partnerships, and resource outcomes. The Island has a unique opportunity to create one plan, irrespective of land tenure utilising the expertise and resources of the bushfire hazard leader and all public land management agencies. With leadership from the KI Bushfire Prevention Committee, the KI Council, DEH and CFS have combined to achieve this, and the planning process has commenced with extensive and intensive public consultation. With significant support

from the CFS and the NSW Rural Fire Service, the plan has also been developed as a pilot within regional South Australia, and has adapted the NSW planning approach. Unlike the hazard based approach historically used in South Australia, the NSW model is risk based, and encompasses the four principles of Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery. Importantly, it is also a landscape scale approach, and community participation is essential. This approach and the determination of the community to effect change have seen excellent attendance and high quality input into the community planning meetings.

The timing of our plan has coincided with a multitude of reform processes. The Ministerial Review of Bushfire management, the Fire and Emergency Services Act Review, the Wangary inquest findings, the review of the Native Vegetation Legislation, and recently an internal review of DEH Fire Management. Change is in the air, and we need to ensure these reviews add to the solutions, and not to the problems.

The intent of DEH to be part of the solution on Kangaroo Island and to instigate their own internal review is to be commended. The mindset has changed, the policies are changing, and the resourcing must follow. We manage fire prevention on the Island and indeed in this state on a shoe string, while spending millions of dollars each year on fighting campaign fires. Our planning must take into consideration the limitations of our resources and the ability to fund the recommendations. While using the well resourced NSW model, we will be developing the poor man's version.

The plan ultimately aims to allow our community the ability to better prepare and defend itself, for the fires will continue. If we fail in effecting the changes in policy and behaviour with this new approach, the devastation of December 2007 will continue in frequency and ferocity and our community will remain largely undefendable. Keep an eye on the outcome, because if we succeed, we hope that others in this state will follow our lead.

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