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Chair, Standing Committee on
Natural Resource Management
(Climate Change)
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Your Ref:

Our Ref: G07/0732, NES/0034

Dear Ms Buchbach

I refer to your request of 4 April seeking a submission from the NSW Rural Fire Service in relation to additional terms of reference for the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Natural Resource Management (Climate Change).

Thankyou for the opportunity to comment, I apologise for the delay in responding to your original letter. I understand that an officer from the RFS has had discussions with you and that it would still be of benefit for the RFS to provide this submission.

There are several issues that the RFS believes need to be considered in relation to carbon trading schemes as detailed below.

Reforestation programmes for carbon capture

Reforestation is increasingly being used with financial incentives as a carbon capture strategy and there is a need to consider the fire management of these areas. Establishing plantations or significant regeneration may create an increased amount of fuel hazard and potential fire paths as well as an increased intensity of the impact of fires on assets. When establishing these programmes there is a need to consider their proximity to assets to allow for the provision of fire trails and access ways as well as provisions for radiation buffer zones and long term maintenance by the use of mechanical and burning techniques.

Changes in the distribution of bush fire hazard around the state may also require changes in the location and type of fire appliances, fire stations and other fire fighting resources. There may also be an increased need for volunteer fire fighters' time for prescribed burning and fire suppression.

Potential carbon retention benefit from fire management programmes

A programme is already in place in the Northern Territory where specific fire management regimes are being used to maintain lower carbon emissions as part of a carbon trading scheme. There is a need to research the potential for the application of this process in NSW. There may be a more significant contribution from the soil stored carbon and we understand that work is being done at the University of Wollongong to investigate this.

If specific fire management practices are found to have a positive benefit for carbon retention the NSW RFS is well placed to assist land managers in achieving these goals.

Carbon benefits from saving property

When structures, such as houses and factories, are burnt down in a fire a significant amount of carbon and other green house gasses are released into the atmosphere. Further a significant amount of energy and materials are required in the fire fighting and subsequent reconstruction. More successful strategies to prevent house loss may assist in reducing the carbon emissions within the state.

Other land management practices

Historically much of the cropping landscape in NSW was managed by stubble burning. This is increasingly being overtaken by alternative approaches such as direct drilling. This leaves much of the biomass on the ground, which may have benefits for water use and soil quality as well as carbon emissions but it does leave a significant fire hazard. Appropriate fire management strategies will need to be considered for these areas.

Carbon offsets from changed vehicle types

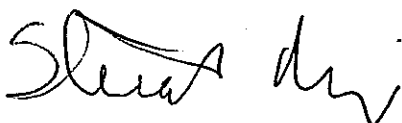
If any penalty/cost is to be imposed for higher emission vehicles the unique nature of emergency service vehicles needs to be considered. The RFS has over 4000 fire tankers currently in service. The yearly distance travelled with these vehicles is relatively very low, as compared to commercial trucks. Replacement of this fleet would require a very significant cost and the performance requirements of any replacement vehicles would need to meet the high demand for operational use.

Conclusion

The RFS recognises that climate change forecasts predict a significant increase in the number of very high and extreme fire danger days in NSW. This has the potential to result in an increased risk of loss of life and property due from bush fires. The RFS is committed to continued dialogue and research into adaptation and mitigation measures to improve the management of future bush fires with the increased risk from climate change.

If you require further information please contact Simon Heemstra, Manager Community Planning on (02) 8741 5434.

Yours sincerely



Stuart Midgley
Group Manager
Coordinated Risk Management