



TROPICAL SAVANNAS CRC

MEDIA RELEASE

Bushfires burning in North Queensland

But NAFI - www.firenorth.org.au - helps land managers

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While southern Australia is experiencing another period of extreme bushfire activity with homes and lives threatened, northern Queensland is looking for the wet season to provide much needed relief to fires still burning.

In north Queensland, a late wet season and a hot dry winter have fuelled bushfires burning across large areas of Cape York, the Gulf Country and coastal areas around Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone and the central highlands.

“The fires are burning later in the year and more areas are burning than on average,” said Peter Thomson from the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (TSCRC).

Up to 40 times more area is burnt every year in the north of Australia than in the south.

While the fires burning across northern Australia each year receive far less press than those in the south, they can be devastating to the people that live in the region, affecting pastoralists, Aboriginal communities and conservation values.

The main differences between the north and south relate to the level of population and infrastructure, the timing of the peak fire seasons and the attitudes of fire agencies in managing the bushfire issue.

“Bushfire activity will always remain part of the Australian environment but now the emphasis is increasingly being placed on new equipment to fight fires rather than manage it,” Mr Thomson said.

“The amount of fuel available and the weather influence how severe the fires will be. The simple truth is that an unplanned fire will almost always occur under the worst possible weather conditions.

“The only practical way to provide a measure of fire protection is to remove the continuously accumulating fuel on a regular basis through activities like controlled burning.”

The emphasis in north Australia has been on proactive fire management strategies that assist landowners to burn excess fuel during milder weather conditions and minimise the impact and spread of high intensity wildfires during hot dry conditions.

This is one of the reasons the TSCRC developed the North Australia Fire Information (NAFI) website to assist people with the latest satellite information about fires.

People can access the site at any time to see where fires are, where they are likely to be and what areas have already been burnt.

“In this way, they know where fires have already burnt, what areas have not had fire for some time and may need controlled burning, and when a fire is approaching or on their property,” Mr Thomson said.

“The NAFI site indicates that huge areas of Queensland have not been burnt for many years. This means there is the very frightening prospect of uncontrollable fires in the future.”

Quotes from people using NAFI in north Queensland are available – contact Jenni Metcalfe (includes: grazier, Aboriginal community, National Parks manager, Threatened Species Unit Ranger)

For interview: Peter Thomson, phone: 07 4031 3432, 0438 313 432

For media assistance: Jenni Metcalfe, phone 0408 551 866, jenni@econnect.com.au

Quotes from people using the NAFI site in north Queensland

Doreen Quartermaine and her husband Cameron own Watson River, a 89,000 hectare cattle grazing property near Weipa.

“During the dry season, we go on to the site every day to check for fire activity,” she says. “The NAFI web site saves me heaps of time and worry. Without it, I have to rely on seeing smoke in the distance and looking at the Bureau of Meteorology website to see which way it is likely to go.

“Our property is 60 kilometres by 30 kilometres. If we see smoke, we have to drive and check it out. But with NAFI, I can tell before going out if the fire is big enough for us to have to grade a track and back burn to avoid it getting any bigger.”

NAFI also provides information to National Parks looking to control fires.

“NAFI is an extremely handy tool,” says **Andrew Hartwig from Lakefield National Park** in Cape York. “The area here is half a million hectares of flat country and you can’t tell where the fire is coming from.”

“On the NAFI site, you can see where the hot spots are, where they started and more importantly you can see where the fires are in relation to fire breaks in the Park or on neighbouring properties.”

“By looking at the hot spots we know if we need to go out and do something about it. It gives us peace of mind about what is or isn’t going on. When I am away from the Park, I can get on the net and see if we need to get on the phone and get someone to do something about the fires.”

Hartwig says NAFI gives a bird’s-eye view of the state of fire breaks and where the fires are. He uses it to plan the burning program for the following year.

Peta Standley works with the Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research project near Laura and uses NAFI to check how traditional fire practices are helping to manage bushfire.

“As a researcher the NAFI site provides access to information about fires that have or are occurring in the area I am interested in. As a modern scientific tool that other land manager, researchers, government departments and the wider community are beginning to understand, I can use it to help the Elders to promote the benefits of their fire man practices.

Our research project uses tools of both Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems to help translate the benefits of traditional fire knowledge.”

Keith McDonald, Chief Ranger of the Threatened Species Unit with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service says they have an unusual use of the NAFI site. While others use it to protect species from fire, they use it to detect threatened species.

“Certain mammals rely on species of fungi that regenerate after fire,” he says. “Some rare plants grow after a particular combination of fire and rainfall distribution.

“We are seeing some plants that we have not seen for almost 100 years by tracking where the fires have been and when plants are most likely to regenerate.”

For interview:

Doreen Quartermaine, phone 07 4060 3267

Peta Standley, phone 07 400 966 223, 0400 966 223

Andrew Hartwig, phone 07 4060 3271, 0427 601 095 or 07 4069 5777

Keith McDonald, phone 07 4091 8126

For media assistance: Jenni Metcalfe, phone 0408 551 866, jenni@econnect.com.au

See: NAFI website - www.firenorth.org.au