Managing fire for koalas, life and property on the Tweed Coast - *an overview of fire planning for the Tweed Coast koala*

Overview

The *Tweed Coast Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management* (CKPOM) identifies fire as major threat to the Tweed Coast Koala. To address this threat, Tweed Shire Council has prepared the **Tweed Coast Koala Fire Management Plan,** which seeks to address a range of fire management issues affecting koalas and their habitat.

Importantly, the primary aim of the plan is to **reduce wildfire risk,** offering **mutual benefit to both koalas, and human life and property**. In order to achieve these complimentary aims, the plan also seeks to be consistent with the provisions of the *NSW Rural Fires Act (1997),* Far North Coast Bushfire Risk Management Plan and relevant NPWS Fire Management Strategies.

The Plan outlines four management strategies, including:

1. Access and Strategic Fire Breaks
2. Hazard Reduction
3. Bush Fire Response
4. Education, Monitoring & Research

Arising from the plan, Council has also drafted two key outputs to guide implementation of Strategies 2 & 3:

1. **Hazard Reduction Burn Guidelines for Koala Habitat on the Tweed Coast** (Strategy 2)
2. **Bush Fire Response Procedure for Koala Habitat on the Tweed Coast** (Strategy 3)

The relationship of these planning documents is outlined in the figure below, and the purpose and content of each document is outlined on the following page.
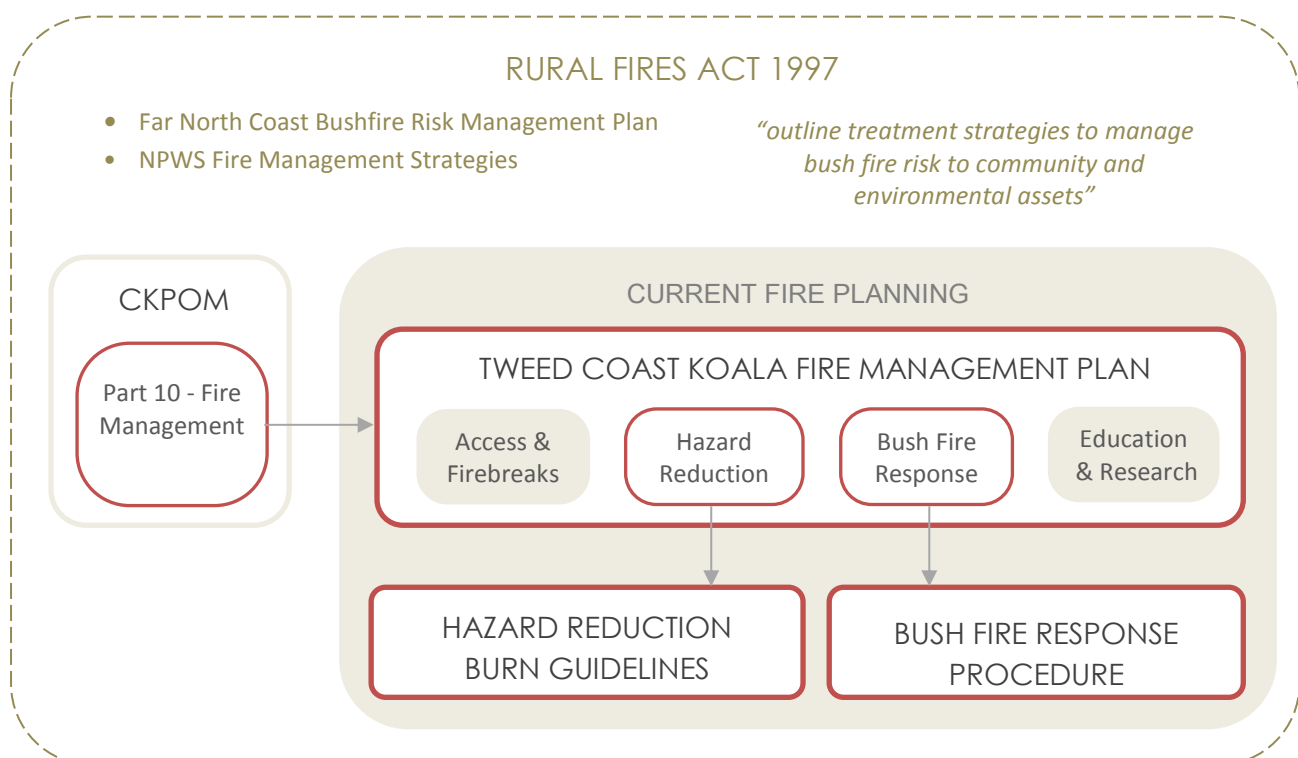

Figure 1. Plan relationships

Tweed Coast Koala Fire Management Plan

Purpose: Identify the main fire management issues affecting the Tweed Coast koala population and outline strategies for the management of these issues.

Content: The plan identifies the major fire-management issues threatening the Tweed Coast koala, including, i) high intensity bush fires, ii) peat fires that cause widespread collapse of koala habitat, and iii) fire exclusion resulting in the progressive decline and displacement of koala habitat.

The plan outlines four management strategies as outlined below.

1. *Access and Strategic Firebreaks* – outlines actions required to identify and establish new additions of on ground fire infrastructure to better manage bush fire and hazard reduction burn operations in koala habitat.

2. *Hazard Reduction (HR)* – outlines an HR program to maintain reduced fuel loads in order to reduce bush fire severity and assist fire suppression activities. Hazard reduction burning is the main strategy recommended for reducing bush fire hazard in koala habitat. (*See plan output A below*)

3. *Bush Fire Response* - establishes a set of best-practice procedures to minimise adverse impacts on koalas and their habitat during bush fire suppression activities. (*See Plan output B below*)

4. *Education, Monitoring & Research* - actions to engage private landowners in bush fire planning, increase community awareness of the importance of HR burning to bush fire safety and koala conservation, and undertake research to ensure best practices for fire management in koala habitat.

The two plan outputs currently in preparation are outlined below.

A. Hazard Reduction Burn Guidelines

Purpose: Hazard Reduction burns in koala habitat can reduce the risk of wildfires: i) killing koala individuals, ii) causing long-term koala habitat decline, and threatening human life and property. However, it is essential that HR burns themselves also avoid harming koala individuals and habitat, and other conservation values such as fire-sensitive vegetation and cultural heritage site.

The main purpose of the guidelines is to allow land managers to undertake hazard reduction burning within koala habitat with minimal impact on:

• koala individuals, canopy food resources and habitat condition, and

• fire-sensitive vegetation and items of cultural heritage.

Content: The guidelines outline procedures to determine if an HR burn is needed, and also to minimise adverse impacts from HR burning on koalas and their habitat, peat soils, fire-sensitive vegetation and cultural heritage values.

B. Bush Fire Response Procedure

Purpose: The *Bush Fire Response Procedures* provide incident controllers and other key personnel with a range of koala-related information which can help to minimise adverse impacts on koalas during bush fire suppression activities.

Content: The procedures present a range of koala-related information, including: operational guidelines for back burning, wildfire suppression and post-fire operations; key contacts and responsibilities; as well as spatial constraints mapping (i.e. suppression priority, peat soil risk and biodiversity thresholds).