



A Bushfire CRC Submission on

The Productivity Commission's Draft report on

"Public Support for Science and Innovation"

The Bushfire CRC welcomes the draft report prepared by the Productivity Commission and is pleased to have the opportunity to provide input and comment. It believes the report is a valuable and timely contribution to discussion of the future of publicly funded research.

Firstly the Bushfire CRC notes and supports the submission on the draft report by the CRC Association.

The Public Good Nature of the Bushfire CRC

The Bushfire CRC was established in July 2003 following the devastating fires in Sydney in December/January 2001/02. It is one of the largest CRCs with over 30 partners across Australia and New Zealand.

The aims of the CRC are encapsulated in its mission "to reduce the risks of bushfires to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way". This largely means that the outcomes from this CRC are of a public good nature rather than generating economic profits for the commercial sector. Because this CRC is just over three years old in its first round of funding, the benefits from the research are just beginning to flow and we have not made a previous submission on specific productivity impacts arising from that research.

The Objectives of the CRC Programme

The Bushfire CRC's research programs have a strong focus on building community resilience in the face of a recurring bushfire risk. It manages this through its strong linkages with various public sector agencies at both the State and Federal level. The CRC is also addressing critical issues related to land management, such as finding the optimum plan for prescribed burning and the health of the environment. The work of the Bushfire CRC results in safe communities, healthier environments and reduces costs for fire and land management agencies and society through increased efficiencies and effectiveness.

The Bushfire CRC therefore strongly agrees with the Commission's Draft finding 9.4 that "... *the original objectives of the program – the translation of research outputs into economic, social, and environmental benefits – should be reinstated. ...*" This aligns with the general move towards recognition of a triple bottom line approach in the commercial world.

The Australian Government and the States recognised the importance of a research culture in the fire and emergency services industry through both of the recent national inquiries into the 2003 fires - the CoAG "National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management" 2004 ⁽¹⁾ and the House of Representatives Select

Committee report on the recent Australian Bushfires “A Nation Charred” 2003 ⁽²⁾. The Bushfire CRC is contributing strongly to the development of such a research culture and has commenced practical research on a small portion of the research recommended by these inquiries. While the CRC is the obvious existing vehicle to conduct the new research which would be required over a period of the next 5-10 years, the CRC is concerned that the changed objectives of the program and the associated selection criteria would present substantial hurdles to securing a second term of funding.

The Value of the CRC Model

The Bushfire CRC also finds that the CRC structure has resulted in a much more focussed and effective national approach to improvement of bushfire and land management, which is a major safety and environmental issue for Australia.

Prior to the establishment of the CRC the research relating to managing public and environment risk associated with bushfires was scattered and uncoordinated. Very little of this research was effectively adopted by the agencies and authorities; a key element in reduction of the risk. With the formation of the Bushfire CRC, while it has incorporated only part of the total national research activity and groups, the industry now has a stronger point of focus and acceptance for all research, not just that of the CRC. The injection of the Commonwealth funding has enabled the State-based agencies to commit over three times this funding in cash and in-kind to create a critical mass of research that focuses on this critical issue for Australia. This could not have been achieved through the individual agencies contracting individual researchers.

As mentioned above, the broader involvement of the fire and emergency authorities in the CRC structure has also initiated a culture change in the industry. It is now much more focussed on evidence-based decision- making. There is also greater recognition of the requirement to conduct and adopt leading edge thinking in the management of public risk.

This culture change due to research into Bushfires has spilled over into the broader emergency response environment, including urban fire fighting. Again, this could not be achieved through individual contracting arrangement. The CRC has provided the environment and forum for the agencies to learn from each other and the CRC is becoming a highly effective mechanism for knowledge transfer and networking with potential to contribute even more strongly in this area.

The Length of the CRC Funding Term

With the Bushfire CRC now reaching the half-way point, the practical disadvantages of a seven-year term, especially in a first-term CRC, are becoming obvious. Bringing together such a large and varied centre is complex and time consuming. The life of a first-term CRC can be broken into three major phases:

- Establishment: (years 1-2): focus is on establishing systems, processes and research staffing. Build-up to full capacity
- Consolidation (years 2-4): research is running at full capacity, beginning to focus on the transfer of research outputs
- Wind down or re-bid (4-7): while putting maximum effort into knowledge and technology transfer, the CRC faces some uncertainty about the future, and the

erosive effects of inflation on the original grant begin to impact heavily on the fixed budgets.

In the Bushfire CRC we are just beginning the move into the third phase and so are beginning to encounter the impact on our ability to maintain the high level of momentum developed and to keep the newly created researchers in the industry.

It is also worth noting that the study conducted by Allen Consulting for the CRC Association, indicated that the time to realisation to outcomes from the CRC's is typically about nine years and therefore longer than a single term of a CRC.

The above factors, the Bushfire CRC believes, point to a need to extend the life of a CRC to at least a ten years; this would result in a much high productivity due to reduction in the impact of establishment and wind down phases.

It is also the Bushfire CRC's experience that establishing a CRC as an incorporated centre, able to enter into contracts and employ people in its own right has not proven to be onerous, as would appear to be the case in the unincorporated CRCs.

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