

Causal factors in New South Wales investigated bushfires: part 2 – other fires

This Bulletin continues the analysis of bushfire investigation data provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS). For this Bulletin, an examination was conducted of fires determined by the RFS to have been the result of burning activity or machinery and equipment. Together, these types of fires accounted for just over 11 per cent of those investigated. As for deliberate fires, the cause determinations were analysed with the rationale given for the determination. More than one causal factor was noted in some cases.

Burning activity

Thirty-five fires were determined to be the result of private burning activity. One other fire was noted as hazard reduction burning carried out by a land management agency. The rationale for three of the cases stated that the burn was carried out with a permit, and three cases stated the burn was illegal. In six of the private burning cases the rationale noted the owner had admitted lighting one or more fires.

The investigator determined that the fire was lit for hazard reduction purposes in 12 cases, while eight fires were lit to remove unwanted plant materials or other rubbish from a property. Four involved the reignition of previously burned materials. In two cases the rationale indicated there had been ongoing problems with landholders in the area conducting burning activities, while one noted that the activity was consistent with fodder regrowth and pasture improvement methods.

Machinery and equipment

Seventeen fires in this dataset were accidental ignitions related to machinery and equipment. While relatively few, these represent fires that may have been avoidable.

Eight fires were linked to motor vehicle use. Three of these were linked to heat or sparks coming from vehicle exhausts. Three were the result of a vehicle fault in the form of a hot piece of broken brake disc, an electrical fault in a truck and a tractor that caught fire. One fire was caused by sparks from jumper leads arcing, while another was ignited by a crashed motor cycle.

Six of the machinery and equipment fires resulted from the use of tools, mostly cutting tools, such as angle grinders or welding equipment. In one case the fire was caused when the spark arrestor came off a pump motor.

It was concluded in one case that a passenger train which passed through the area shortly before the fire was a possible cause.

Source: NSW RFS Investigation data (AIC file).