

People and bushfires: not just a bush problem?

Between 43 and 49 percent of fires attended by fire agencies annually in Australia occur in vegetation (SCRGS 2006). Analysis by the AIC of fire agency data from across Australia indicates that vegetation fires are a large problem in urban environments. For example, in NSW where fire services are most clearly delineated between urban, rural and land management agencies:

- vegetation fires accounted for 38 percent of all fires attended by the NSW Fire Brigades (urban) in 2002–03 and 61 percent of the fires attended in 2005–06 by the NSW Rural Fire Service
- on average, urban fire brigades attend almost two-thirds, rural fire agencies attend approximately 30 percent, and land management agencies less than five percent of vegetation fires in any given year.

A large proportion – at least one-third to half – of vegetation fires in any state or territory occur around the capital city, with many others being located near other major regional centres. The overwhelming majority (95 to 98 percent) of vegetation fires in Australia are caused by people, either accidentally or intentionally, and the distribution of deliberate vegetation fires is inextricably linked to the distribution of people. Hence, one-third to half of all deliberate vegetation fires happen around Australian capital cities (Table 1).

There is evidence to suggest that more bushfires also occur in areas surrounding capital cities and large urban centres, in areas where there are high numbers of vegetation fires generally. There is a flow-on effect from people to neighbouring natural landscapes, including conservation and forestry reserves. National parks and forestry resources located close to urban areas typically experience a greater number of fires, and commonly a higher proportion of those fires are deliberately lit, than reserves in less populated and more isolated regions.

Land use changes along the urban interface not only bring greater contact between people and natural landscapes, but also commonly alter demographic and social relationships, potentially increasing the risk of bushfire arson in those areas. High rates of deliberate fire setting commonly occur in areas experiencing rapid urban expansion and/or population growth.

Table 1: Vegetation fires in regions incorporating the capital city^a (percent)

State	All fires	Deliberate fires
New South Wales	36	37
Victoria	42	44
Tasmania	44	59
Queensland	46	43

Source: AIC Bushfire arson [data file]

a: based on tourism regions defined by ABS 2006

Note: No data are presented for Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Western Australia and Northern Territory, as available data are incomplete. Analysis based on data supplied by Australian fire agencies. Queensland data are for urban stations only.

References

Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services (SCRGS) 2006. *Report on government services 2006*. <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2006/index.html>