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## WA Bushfire Report highlights the importance of fuel load reduction

The release in Western Australia of the *Report of the Special Inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona Fire*, commissioned following the tragic fires earlier this year, has reinforced calls by many experts for Australia to do more in fuel load reduction.

This is in line with the Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) call for serious funding to be committed to combining strategic mechanical fuel removal as well as burning off operations to lessen the risk of losing rural towns and assets.

AFPA commends Mr Ferguson and the Special Inquiry for recognising the importance of fuel load reduction, with the Report recommending the WA Government "... plan for the highest priority hazard reduction burning effort around settlements and critical assets ..."; set annual targets for "priority hazard reduction"; manage public lands so that "... fuel age of less than six years will be maintained across 45% of the landscape ..."; and expand "... the 'Bushfire Mitigation Grant Scheme' ... to enable the implementation of hazard reduction works."

The Report also identifies the opportunity for mechanical removal of biomass to reduce fire risk, suggesting the responsible agencies "... consider policy options with respect to the clearing of vegetation by landholders within a specified distance of an asset or dwelling, for the purposes of bushfire protection." It also recommends the WA Government "... develop a simplified and fast track hazard reduction burn (and other fuel mitigation techniques) planning and approval process."

Chief Executive Officer of AFPA Mr Ross Hampton said, "The forest industry has been advocating for many years for increased fuel reduction around important rural assets, such as towns, infrastructure (bridges, powerlines, etc.), water catchments, plantations and production forest. Unfortunately, due to community and other pressures on governments, the opposite has occurred, with a substantial decline in fuel reduction burning over the past 25 years – most notably in WA. Nationally, the average annual burn-off area has fallen by more than 30%, while the area burnt in bushfires has more than tripled over the same period."

AFPA recently released a new policy proposal, '*Can We Better Fire-proof Our Country Towns?*' that details a collaborative approach to help reduce the risk of bushfires developing, and engulfing towns and important rural assets, through a combination of mechanical fuel removal and fuel reduction burning. AFPA is calling on the major Parties to commit to increase funding to extend the current 'mechanical removal' pilot programme from \$1.5m to \$30m, and expand it to a broader range of biomass removal projects around regional communities and strategic rural assets.

The report of the Special Inquiry can be found [here](#).

AFPA's policy proposal can be found [here](#).

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