



How much land clearing should people be able to do for fire safety? The Rural Boundary Clearing Code

Description

The Rural Boundary Clearing Code

The commentary here is in reverse chronological order. If you're interested, I suggest watching the videos in the order shown here.

February 2022 third go-around, and things get worse.

The "Rural Boundary Clearing Code". It came to Council for the third time last night.

Why is this so contentious? It might strike you as an obscure decision about land-management policy. But it disguises a far more important principle, and it's very much at stake in this new Council, so it's important to know what this is about.

Some people feel the massive bushfires we endured demonstrate we should allow people more freedom to clear their land for fire safety. Some people worry (and we were shown proofs) that this threatens habitats and that fire safety will be used as an excuse for some to just clear their land for other reasons. Others worry that the Code just won't do what its authors intended because of our local conditions.

All of these concerns are valid.

Passionate, honourable disagreements are why we sit as a Council of twelve to work through these issues. The solution is to consult the community and experts in the field, get informed, and then make considered decisions. Almost every policy Council adopts follows this process.

But not, apparently, this one.

This has been rammed through without any consideration or consultation – and especially with the RFS, who reminded us tonight of their own well-developed plan to improve fire safety. They're white-hot about the disrespect this lack of consultation represents. And that's why I've differed in my opinion

with my Liberal colleagues, with whom I usually agree on other issues.

The issue is why we would adopt a policy with such far-reaching consequences for our land management – which has enormous implications for endangered species like Koalas, and on which opinions differ sharply concerning whether it will actually improve fire safety at all – without *any* consultation with the local RFS. And no resourcing of Council to do compliance and mitigate against mis-use of the Code. And without any thought of how Council should help landowners navigate their eligibility and be good stewards of their land. And without the ability to even measure the impact on tree-cover across the LGA when that could easily be remedied with new off-the-shelf mapping tools.

Frankly, it makes the rhetoric of people who frequently say they respect the RFS, and like to make much of saying they support Koala habitats, more than a little hollow. Worse, in the meeting tonight, debate was axed which cut off Councillors who were yet to speak to the chamber, despite having their ‘zoom hand’ up for half an hour. That was wrong. When we disagree, we shouldn’t silence people just because you may not like what they might say. It’s no way to run a respectful chamber, and I disassociate myself from those who use it as a tactic.

Look, ultimately it may be best if we adopt the Code. But we can’t know because we haven’t asked the right questions. And that’s our job, so I don’t apologise for speaking out.

The above video represents my remarks, but [the full video of the Council debate](#) is something I recommend you watch.

January 2022 – The new Council reverses its previous position and rams the Code through

Last October some of my colleagues tried to ram through the adoption of the “Rural Boundary Clearing Code”, which would allow the clear-felling of up to 15,800 hectares of rural land where landowners assert such clearing is needed to improve fire safety.

I think that Council has a moral obligation to look at this area, given the loss of 65 homes in the Hawkesbury in the fires.

But balancing community safety with protection of the environment is challenging. It takes leadership, and nuancing the various issues and views, not ramming something through without consideration of the consequences.

That attempt last year failed.

Firstly, we had conducted zero formal consultation with our local RFS.

Secondly, it was clear that we needed to resource Council to measure the effects of this policy with geospatial mapping tools, provide guidance to landowners about the torturous eligibility criteria, and ensure we could conduct basic compliance and enforcement. We had no knowledge of a single other Council taking up the voluntary adoption of this code and what that experience looked like for them, and many local experts told me that they were either opposed, or took a “yes, but” approach contingent on these basic precautions.

I advanced an alternative motion to get Council to conduct that consultation and resourcing, and I got it

passed. The report would have come back to Council this year.

However, the complexion of the Council chamber has changed, and on Tuesday my Liberal colleagues again tried to ram summary adoption of the code through. This time, they had the numbers.

So that's it. No consultation. No resourcing for partnering with landowners. No resources for mapping, compliance or enforcement.

Oh, and no takebacks. Once we're in, we're in for good.

I think of this as a massive slap in the face for our local RFS, who are free to be for or against this, but who would have at least been accorded the courtesy of being *asked*. So much for the oft-claimed respect for our RFS.

I've always claimed that it's possible to be a good Conservative, and a good Conservationist. It's a pity that this looks nothing like that.

Environmentally conscious voters in the Hawkesbury, and if I might suggest, across the seat of Macquarie ought to keep their own counsel about whether this looks like the kind of representation they want

In favour of the summary adoption of the code was:

Mayor Conolly, Clr. Richards, Clr. Reardon, Clr. Veigel, Clr. Sheather, Clr. Dogramaci. Passage was ensured with the casting vote of the Mayor after a 6-all deadlock.

Original October 2021 commentary:

At last night's Hawkesbury City Council meeting we considered a thorny question: How much should landowners be allowed to clear their land to protect themselves from bushfires?

There 's a lot to consider. In NSW there's already a mechanism for hazard reduction, [called the 10-50 rule](#). But the government [inquiry](#) held after the terrible [Gospers Mountain fire](#) in 2019-2020 recommended that new rules be considered.

What came from that process is the '[Rural Boundary Clearing Code](#)', and the [on-line tool](#) people are supposed to use to work out if they're eligible to clear under those rules.

Balancing community safety with protecting the environment is challenging. It takes leadership, and nuancing the various issues and views, not ramming something through because you want to make an election issue out of it.

I am glad that my alternative motion gained support and was seen as a better way forward.

Category

1. Uncategorized

Tags

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