

NEWS FROM THE ALPS

E-BLAST

THE ALPS PROGRAM. WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS.



It's a fact: wearing personal protection equipment cuts back your exposure to carcinogens in smoke.

STAY OUT OF THE SMOKE

If you're dealing with fire in the landscape, pay attention. The message from Brett McNamara, Divisional Commander with the ACT Rural Fire Service is simple. Stay-out-of-the-smoke. With a long career, chewing on smoke, Brett was recently diagnosed with advanced, aggressive prostate cancer. What follows is a blunt explanation of the danger posed by smoke, how to reduce your exposure to it, what happens if years later you develop a smoke-linked cancer, and why you should pay attention to Brett. Let's start with the smoke.

"I spent my first ten years up in the Northern Territory, working for the Parks Service: my first experience of fires was as a squinter & squirter on the back of a truck. Thirty years followed, working with ACT Parks with the ACT Rural Fire Service. And during the last decade or so, when I've attended pre-fire season briefings, smoke has not been mentioned once. We talk about killer trees, trucks rolling, flames on the fire ground. But now we need to talk about long-term exposure to smoke increasing the risk of developing a life-threatening cancer."



Briefings like this are the moment to make everyone aware of the danger of smoke, and what to do to minimize exposure.

Not just one - as it turns out - but *twelve* different cancers. Which is why people who routinely deal with fires need to know about the risk. And in case there are any doubts about this smoke related -cancer link, official proof is surely in the existence of a national compensation act (2011) for fire fighters. Thanks to Brett's lobbying politicians this is currently being simplified and strengthened at the state level within the ACT, so that it offers the same, seamless compensation currently available for people across the border in New South Wales and Victoria. The message to take from this is that if you work in a fiery environment, and have done for many years, and you develop one of the 12 cancers (see handy table below), it's presumed that this prolonged smoke exposure has increased your risk, importantly you will be compensated.

SMOKED-LINKED CANCERS

Brain cancer	5 years*	Testicular cancer	10 years
Bladder cancer	15 years	Multiple myeloma	15 years
Kidney cancer	15 years	Prostate cancer	15 years
Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma	15 years	Ureter cancer	15 years
Leukaemia	5 years	Colorectal	15 years
Breast cancer	10 years	Oesophageal cancer	25 years

If you have one of the 12 smoke related cancers and have spent the qualifying period fighting fires at some point in your past, you may want to take a look at these sites for more information: in [Victoria](#), in [New South Wales](#) and in the [ACT](#).

Of course no-one wants to develop cancer, though it is reassuring to know that compensation is there. Brett agrees wholeheartedly – more about why in a minute – saying, “If we educate people, we’re helping to empower them to protect themselves and our training and awareness for our young, seasonal fire fighters must include the risks associated with smoke inhalation. They’ll know that, like a 14-year-old that starts smoking cigarettes, their cancer risk is low, but with ongoing exposure by the time they’re 60 it’s a different story.”

How then do people reduce their exposure to smoke? “Just like where you decide to park the fire truck, you do an assessment to see if it’s safe. It’s the same when it comes to smoke. Your

aim is to minimise the time you spend in the smoke, so routinely assess where you are, and ask yourself, do I need to be here or can I be effective being elsewhere.”



Working with fire is a routine part of managing landscapes which is why making good choices to minimize your exposure is important.

Respiratory masks are a useful tool, but one that can be hard to wear when you're exerting yourself. Brett says again, you have to make the call but they do work. "I'd make the point that when I first fought fires, we were wearing shorts and T-shirts. Years later when the heavy jackets and pants came in, there was a push back: people said they couldn't cope. But we've learned that the gear works – it protects us from the very real danger of radiant heat."



Most people who work in burnt landscapes, especially those left after major fire events, know the risks posed by killer trees. What they're now learning is that smoke contains carcinogens and exposure over years is life threatening.

On an operational level, protocols need to be developed further so that crews are rotated to minimise their smoke exposure. And finally, there's the lingering threat smoke delivers – the carcinogens that cling to fire jackets, pants as they leave the fire ground. "I look at those images of fire fighters photographed in their blackened state. And my thoughts now aren't so much about those people being heroes as that they need to be decontaminated. Shower off.

Wash your kit frequently and separately. Have a fresh spare. Don't take the contamination home with you to your loved ones."

REDUCING SMOKE EXPOSURE

Ask yourself, do I have to work in the smoke or can I change location.

Wear a respiratory mask.

Keep track of your crews: rotate your time in smoky environments: reduce their and your exposure.

Shower off between shifts and wash your gear; wear fresh, clean PPE.

Brett is across the smoke-cancer-presumptive compensation, but not just because he's been fighting fires for forty years. The fact is, those forty years can be presumed to be why he's in his current position, someone who has been exposed to smoke and was diagnosed a few months back with one of the 12 linked cancers. (As he says, with a successful surgery now behind him, it's onwards and upwards.) But what's interesting is that at the point of discovering he had prostate cancer, despite his many years on various fire grounds, Brett didn't make the connection between his cancer and prolonged smoke exposure. Nor did he know that presumptive compensation was available. He then went on to learn that while he could access the compensation, people like seasonal or volunteer fire fighters in the ACT would struggle. So alongside his treatment, he began lobbying on their behalf. As a result, and with some good politicians wholeheartedly on board, he's helped ensure the ACT's version of the fire fighter compensation legislation is being sorted. Soon it won't matter how you come to be on an Alps fire ground, or on which side of a state border you're standing: there's now a safety net in place in case it's needed. But maybe take note of Brett's first bit of advice: stay out of the smoke. Oh, and one more tip from Brett for the blokes, when was your last PSA Blood Test? It could potentially save your life - take it from someone who knows.



Fighting fires isn't a solo activity: people work side by side, like Bret McNamarra (left) and Dave Darlington, a former manager Kosciuszko National Park. Getting the safety messages out to everyone is important.

THANK YOU BRETT!

This month's edition of the Alps News E-Blast has touched on the issue of safety and welfare. An issue that we all need to be constantly aware of, reviewing and striving for improvement. The increased health risks of long-term bushfire smoke exposure to our firefighters professional and volunteer has been known for some time. But as Brett McNamara points out in the article above it is often overlooked in comparison to the many other immediate risks and threats our firefighters and park management staff have faced over the years and face on a daily basis, such as tree fall risk, fire over-run etc. Hopefully Brett's experience brings home the message: regardless of whether you're an 'old hand' or a new park management staff member or volunteer firefighter, you need to look out for your team's and your own personal safety and welfare, both in the short-term and in the long-term. This includes using personal protective equipment, following and improving on safety procedures, creating and promoting a safety culture, as well as the importance of staying on top of your own personal physical and mental health and fitness, with regular medical check-ups and mental health check-ins. It is also heartening to know that since the 2019/20 bushfire season, improved Personal Protective Equipment and smoke mitigation procedures are being rolled out, put in place and emphasised across the firefighting and park management agencies.

Many of you who have been involved or know of the Australian Alps National Parks Co-operative Management Program have probably crossed paths with Brett McNamara over the years. Whether in his role as ACT Parks Ranger, Park Manager, Australian Alps Program Co-ordinator, Alps Liaison Committee Rep or Reference Group member and convenor. In all these roles and functions, Brett has served with infectious enthusiasm over the last three decades. He's not only been a mainstay but also a passionate advocate of the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, but more broadly the Australian Alps Program and the important conservation work we do, and all that these organisations stand for. This advocacy includes not only protecting the natural and cultural values of the Australian Alps national parks, but also promoting mentoring and capacity building of our park staff who work in the Alps, as well as looking out for the safety and welfare of Park management agency staff across the Alps. Brett is a positive upbeat kind of guy and his contribution has been enormous: it was going to be a huge loss to both ACT Parks and the Australian Alps Program when he decided earlier this year that he was going to take a step back and look at transitioning towards retirement. It then came as a bit of a shock to learn that Brett was now facing a new battle with his personal health. It was not surprising then, in typical Brett style, that he was keen to share and use his experience to benefit and educate others, including seeking legislative change in the Commonwealth and ACT to ensure that fellow firefighters and park management staff were appropriately protected and compensated.

We're glad to report that Brett's surgery and treatment have gone well and his prognosis is good. The Australian Alps Program and Alps community extends its sincere thanks to Brett and his family for the many years of diligent service in protecting and advocating on behalf of the Australian Alps: we wish him all the best for the future as he transitions towards retirement and life after a career in park management.

- Rob Gibbs, Australian Alps Program Manager

TELL US YOUR STORY: We are always looking for stories to include in this newsletter. What's happening in your part of the Alps? If you've built a new bridge, cleared a track, managed pests, done vegetation restoration works or worked on threatened species recovery, why not send Rob Gibbs a photo and a quick line and he'll take care of the rest. Maybe you just went for a particularly fabulous walk and would like to share your experience. We're always happy to hear from agency staff members, volunteers and members of the general community.

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