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Threatened species habitat at risk from a hotter climate

New research released today has found climate change will expose larger areas of forest in coastal NSW to higher frequency and more intense fires, amplifying the changes to fire regimes brought about by the 2019/20 fires.

Leading researchers at the University of the Wollongong, a partner at the NSW Bushfire Research Hub, conducted the research using the latest data on behalf of the NSW Natural Resources Commission.

According to the lead researcher, Emeritus Professor Ross Bradstock, “The 2019/20 fires mean now only 10 percent of forested areas are currently within their recommended fire frequency thresholds. We found half of the state forest and national park area is now classified as ‘vulnerable’ in coastal NSW. This means the 2019/20 fires effectively doubled the extent of vulnerable forested vegetation on these tenures.”

The research also modelled what would happen to the habitat of 24 threatened species under a climate change scenario of hotter temperatures and little change in rainfall. Of the 24 species, seven species are predicted to have their habitat reduced by over 75% by 2070.

NSW Natural Resources Commissioner Professor Hugh Durrant-Whyte said. “This is an important report, one that highlights consequences of the 2019/20 bushfires and future climate for NSW's forests and provides guidance for future planning of our forests”.

Other findings from the research include:

- The 2019/20 fires impacted about 3.6 million hectares of forests across all tenures within the mapped Coastal IFOA region.
- Around 60 percent of the total state forest and national park area within this region was burnt, almost half of which was subject to high or extreme fire severity.
- Previous timber harvesting did not increase the fire extent or severity of the 2019/20 fires. However, there is potential for cumulative impacts in harvested landscapes that are subject to fire, particularly in the next 5 to 10 years.

This research supports the recommendations of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, and through the implementation of those recommendations, the NSW Government can lead efforts to mitigate the impacts and risks from changing fire regimes and climate.

The full report can be found on the Commission’s website: <https://www.nrc.nsw.gov.au/ifoamer-research>

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About the Natural Resources Commission

The Commission provides independent, evidence-based advice to the NSW Government to sustainably manage natural resources over the long term and ensure the wellbeing of current and future generations.

This research was commissioned as part of the NSW Government's Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program, a collaborative cross tenure program to deliver evidence for decision making.

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