



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology



ACT DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
& COMMUNITY SAFETY

# Fire Bugged

## *Bushfire arson – now and beyond*




**Matthew Willis**  
**Australian Institute of Criminology**



# Outline of this presentation

- What have we done?
- What are we doing?
- What are we going to do?

*...Why are we doing it?*



# **FIREBUGS!**

**Brigades  
hunt down  
arsonists**

**‘Wicked’  
arsonists  
light five  
more fires**

**Spreading  
fire and fear**



**Hunt  
them  
down**

**‘Acts of sheer  
bastardry’**

**Arson  
behind  
a state  
of misery**

**21  
LUCIFERS**

# BushFIRE Arson Bulletins



## BushFIRE Arson Bulletin

Australian Government  
Australian Institute of Criminology

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### What is arson?

Arson is the act of intentionally and maliciously destroying or damaging property through the use of fire. Within this definition there are four core elements:

- the lighting of fire – fire is the fundamental element of arson; if there is no fire it, there is no arson (some legal definitions also include lighting explosives);
- intention or recklessness – excludes fires started by natural causes or accidents;
- malice – excludes fires started intentionally with positive or legitimate intent; and
- property – there must be some kind of property or object that is burned.

The element of intent is critical to a definition of arson. People deliberately light fires for many reasons, including for some legitimate and legal purposes. For example, people may light fires at home in a fireplace, or at a camp site in an approved place when there are no fire bans in force, or prescribed burning conducted in a controlled manner for fuel and land management purposes. In all these cases the fire is deliberately lit but does not constitute arson as there was no intention to cause damage or harm and no breach of the law.

In any of these cases the fire may spread to fuels surrounding the fire site, creating a large fire and causing property and environmental damage and even injury or loss of life. Assuming there was no negligence or reckless indifference involved, and the person or persons responsible for controlling the fire did all they reasonably could to keep the fire under control, there is no arson and no breach of the law because there was never an intention to cause damage or harm.

The term arson is not usually used in fire-related data. In a strict sense, arson can be seen as a concept defined by legislation. Unless a court rules that the legal elements of arson have been proved in a particular case, arson in the legal sense has not occurred. To discuss arson in strict legal terms would narrow the subject of interest unduly, so 'arson' in this series of bulletins will include the broader categories of incendiary and suspicious fires. Incendiary fires are those where the evidence or a legal outcome indicates that a fire was deliberately lit. Suspicious fires are those where circumstances – such as multiple ignition factors or the lack of accidental or natural ignition factors – suggest the possibility that the fire may have been deliberately lit.

The term 'firesetting' will also be used in these bulletins as a term which goes beyond the strict legal definition of arson to more generally refer to the behaviour of deliberately lighting fires.

*For more information:*  
Drabsch T 2003. Arson: defining paper 22003. Sydney: NSW Parliament <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/PWWebContent.nsf/PWPages/Research/022003>

An initiative of the Bushfire CRC: <http://www.bushfirecra.com>  
and the  
Australian Institute of Criminology: <http://www.aic.gov.au>

# Arson topic section and bibliography



[www.aic.gov.au / topics /  
arson](http://www.aic.gov.au/topics/arson)



# Bushfire Arson – A review of the literature





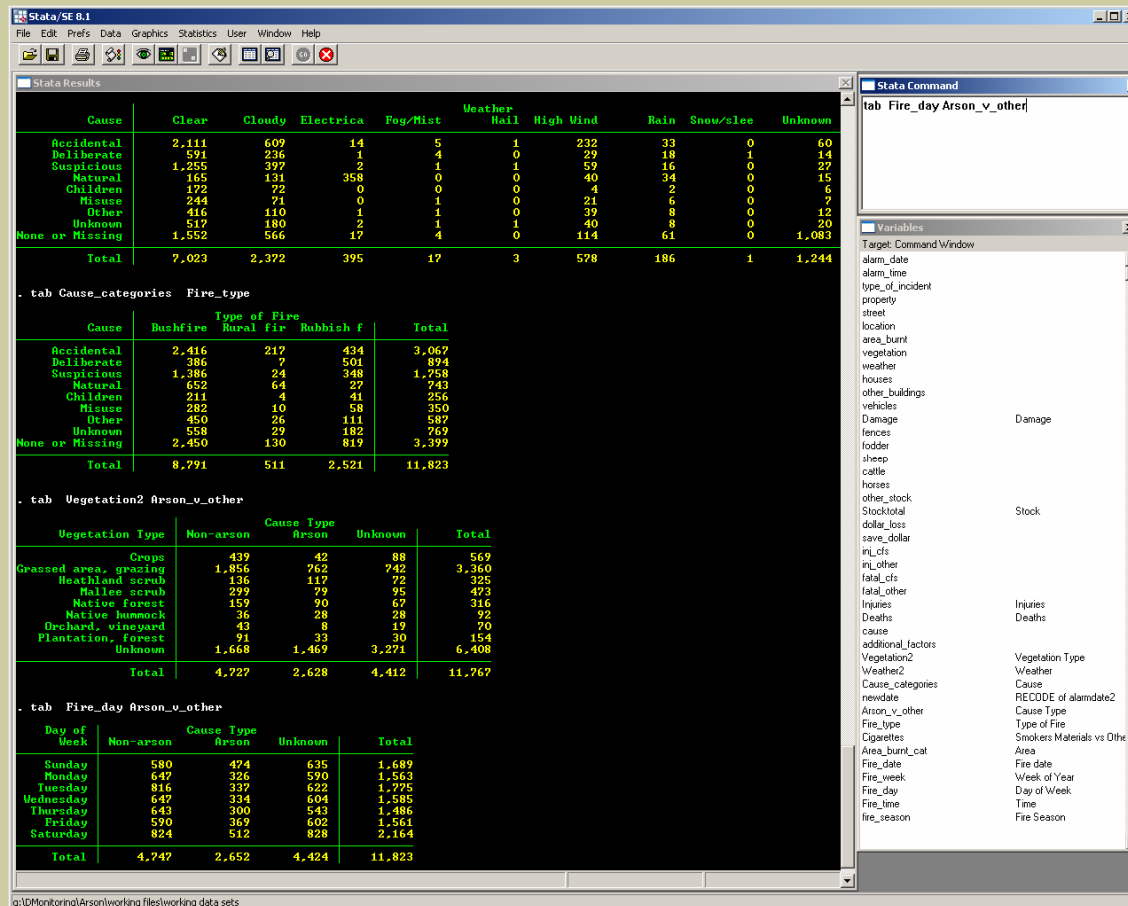


# A bushfire arson typology

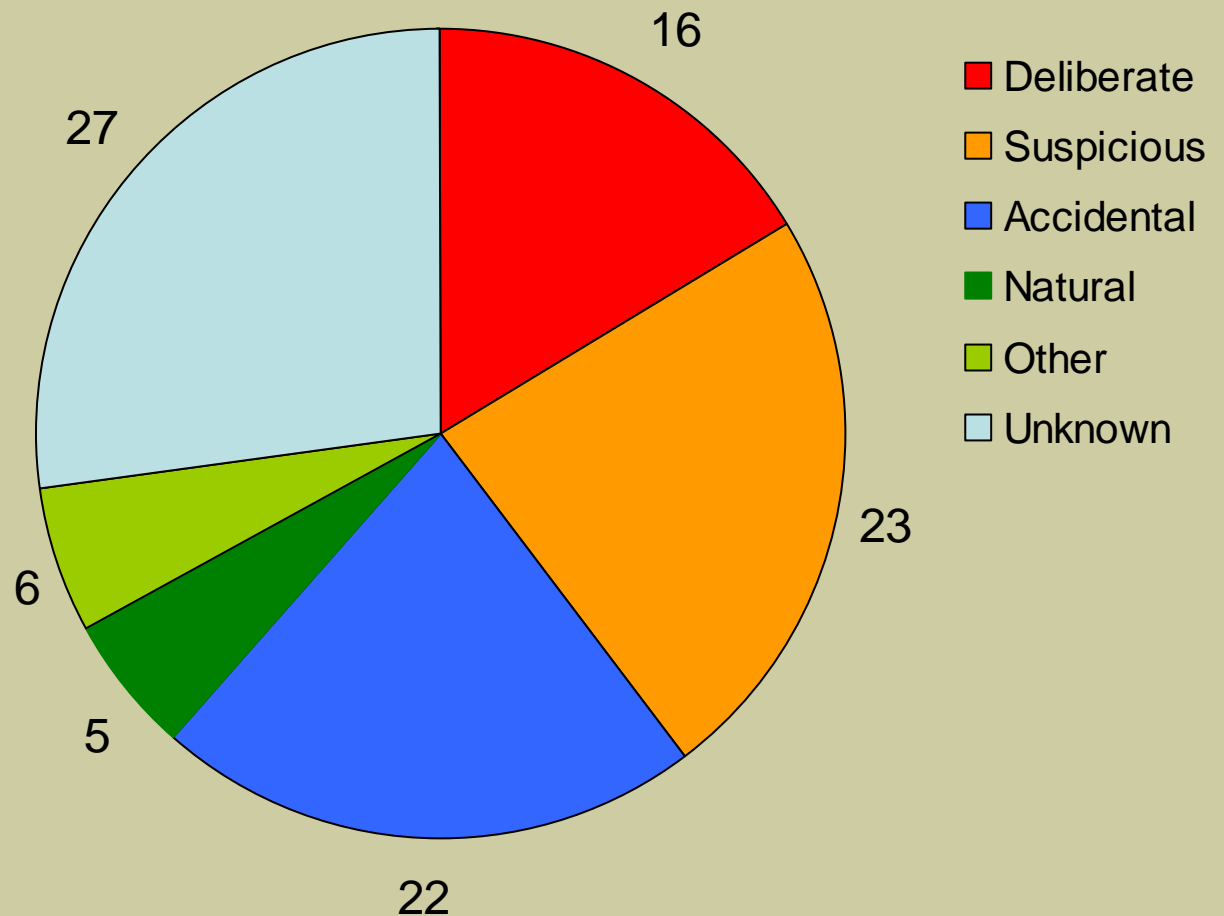
## Bushfires lit:

1. to create excitement or relieve boredom
2. for recognition and attention
3. for a specific purpose or gain
4. without motive
5. with mixed motives

# Data collection & analysis

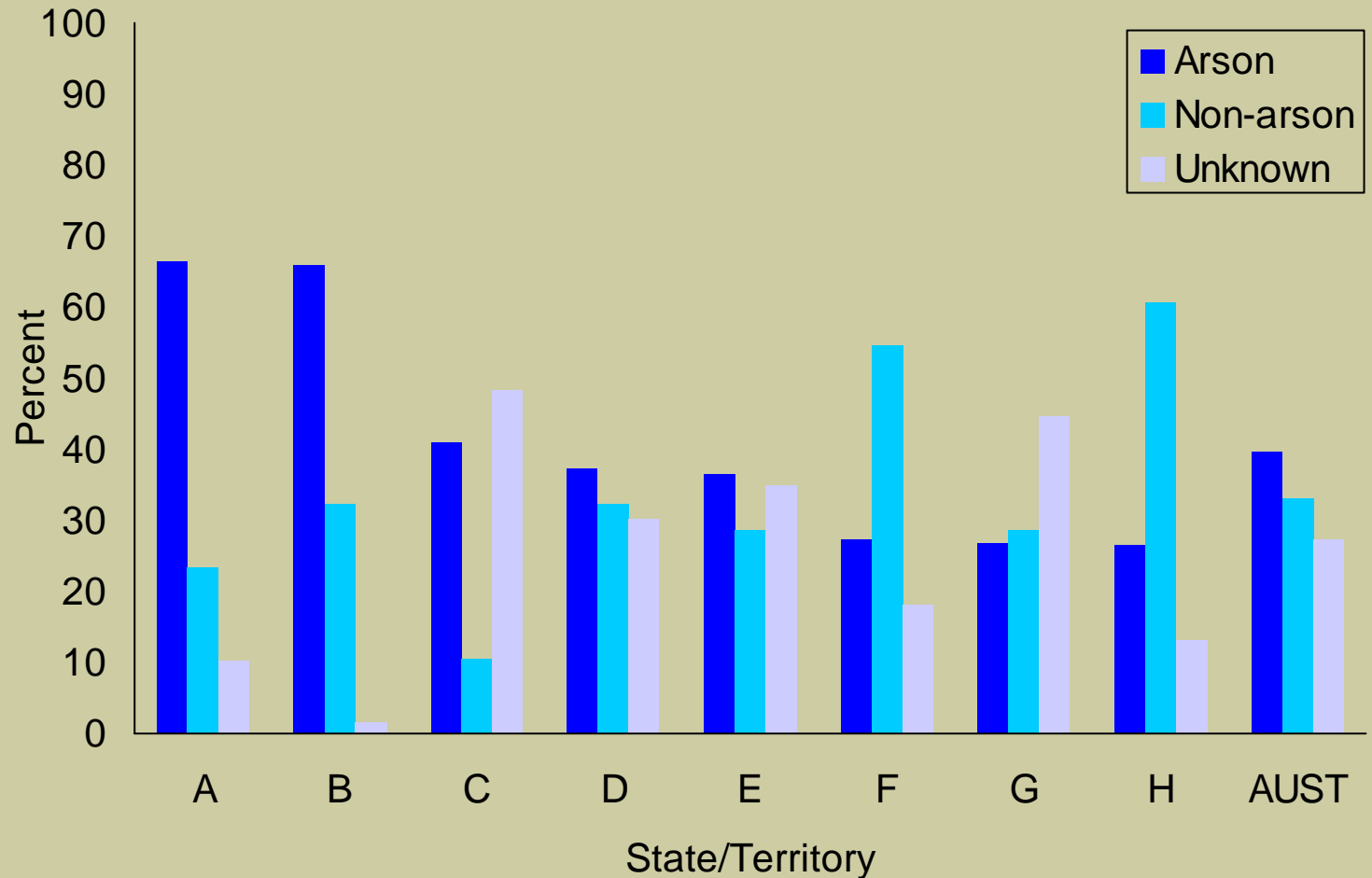


# Bushfire causes - Australia



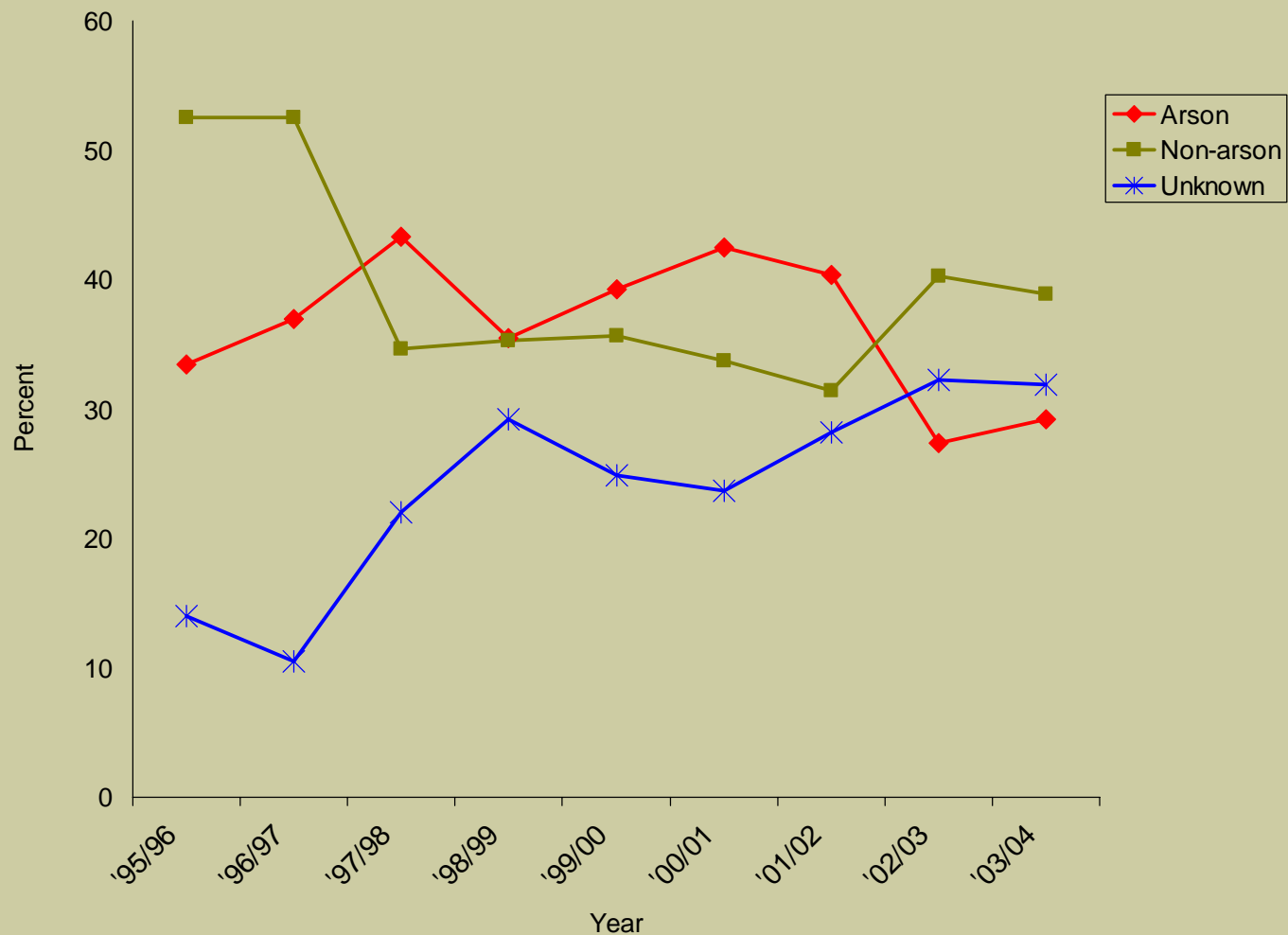
Source: Australian bushfire causes (AIC file)

# Bushfire causes - Australia



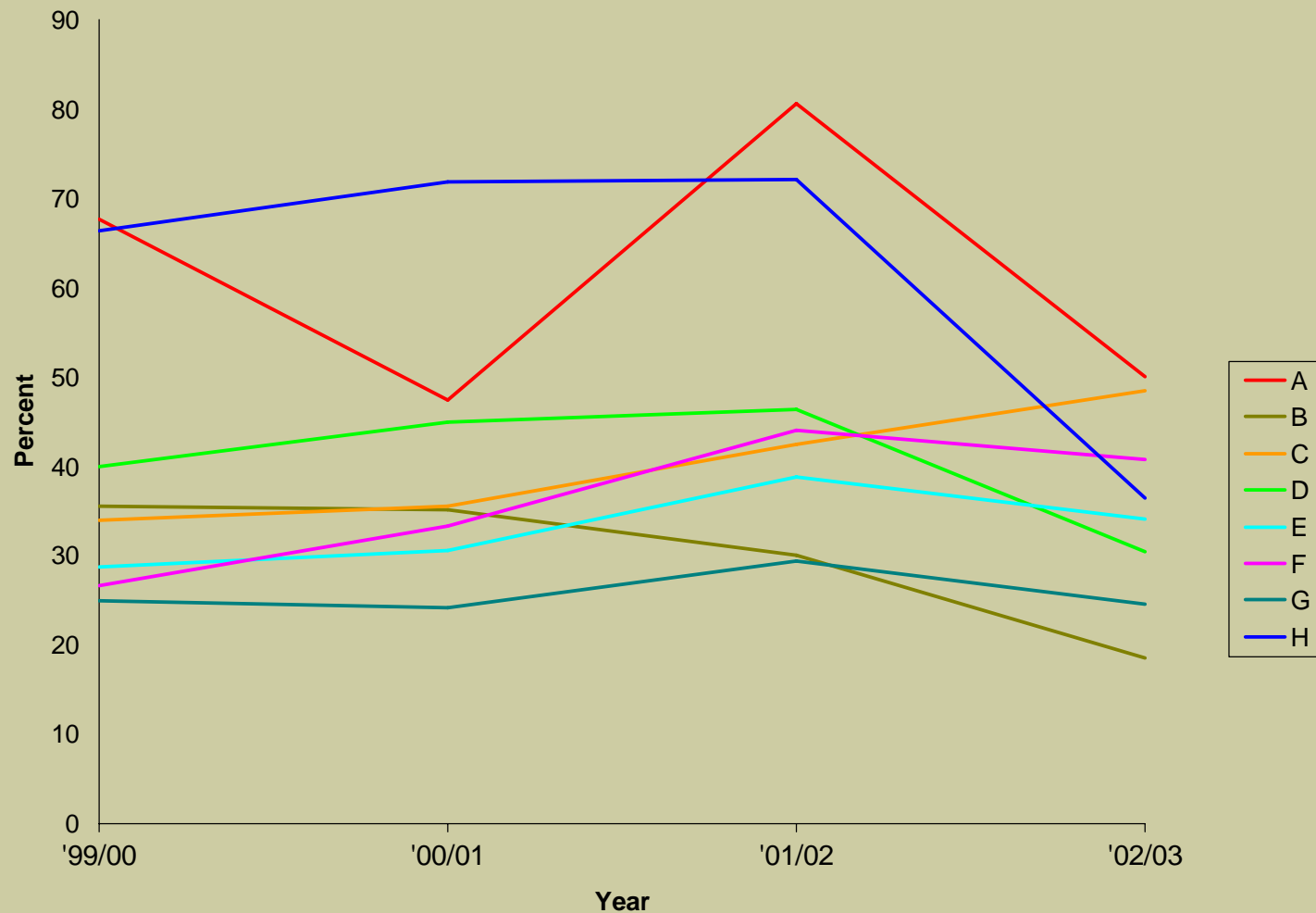
Source: Australian bushfire causes (AIC file)

# Deliberately lit bushfires 1995/2004 (All Australian bushfires)



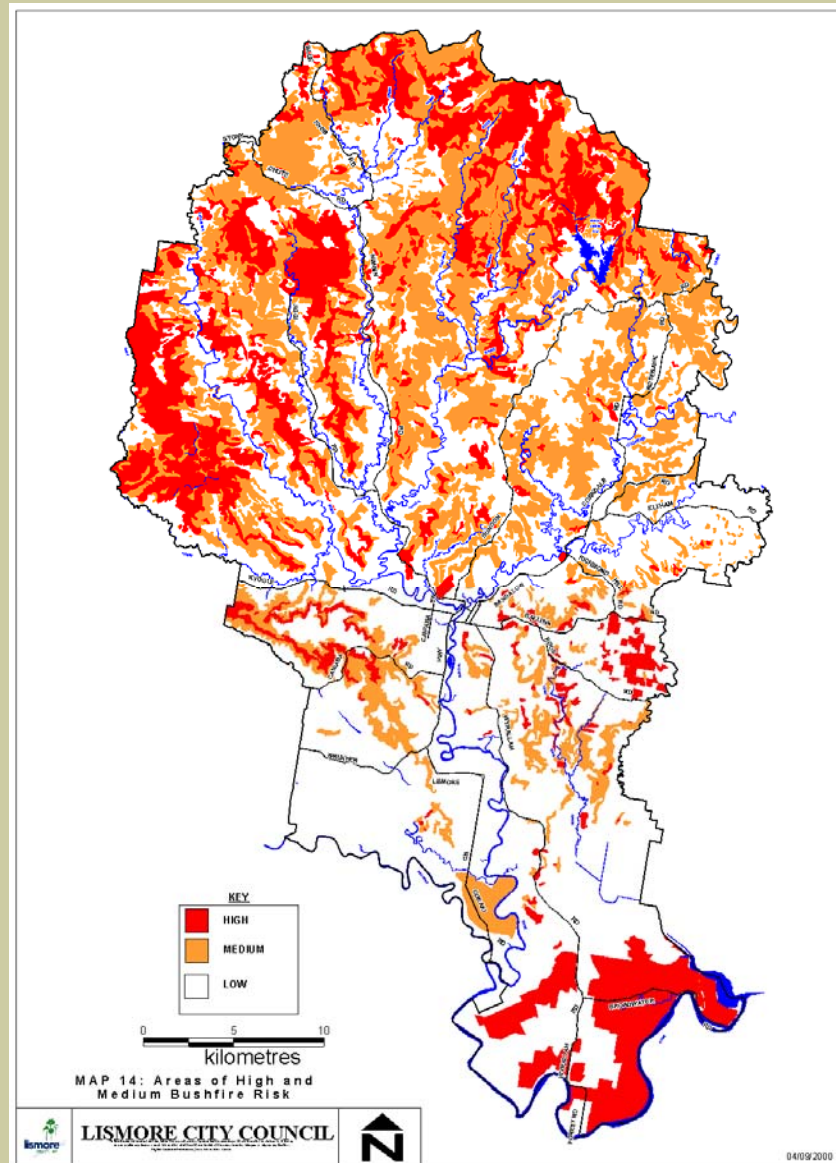
Source: Australian bushfire causes (AIC file)

# Deliberately lit bushfires 99/00 to 02/03

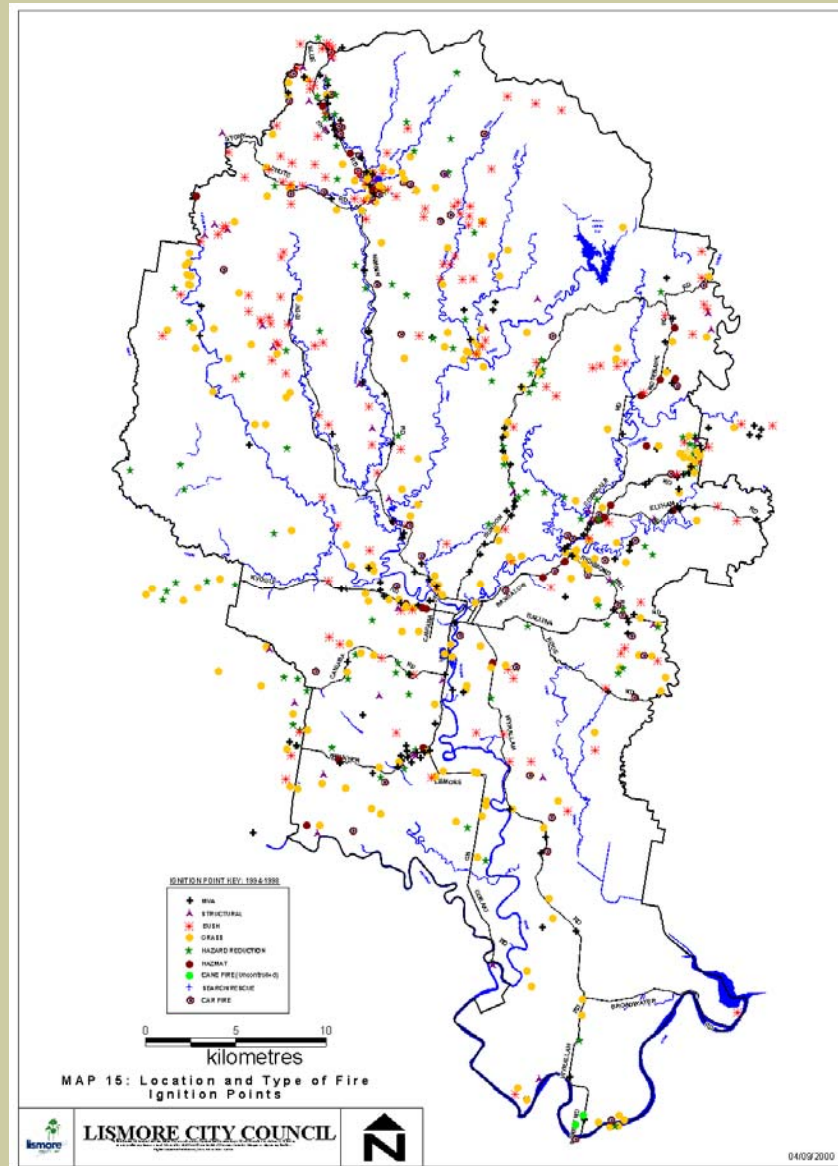


Source: Australian bushfire causes (AIC file)

# Mapping fire risk



# Mapping fire ignitions

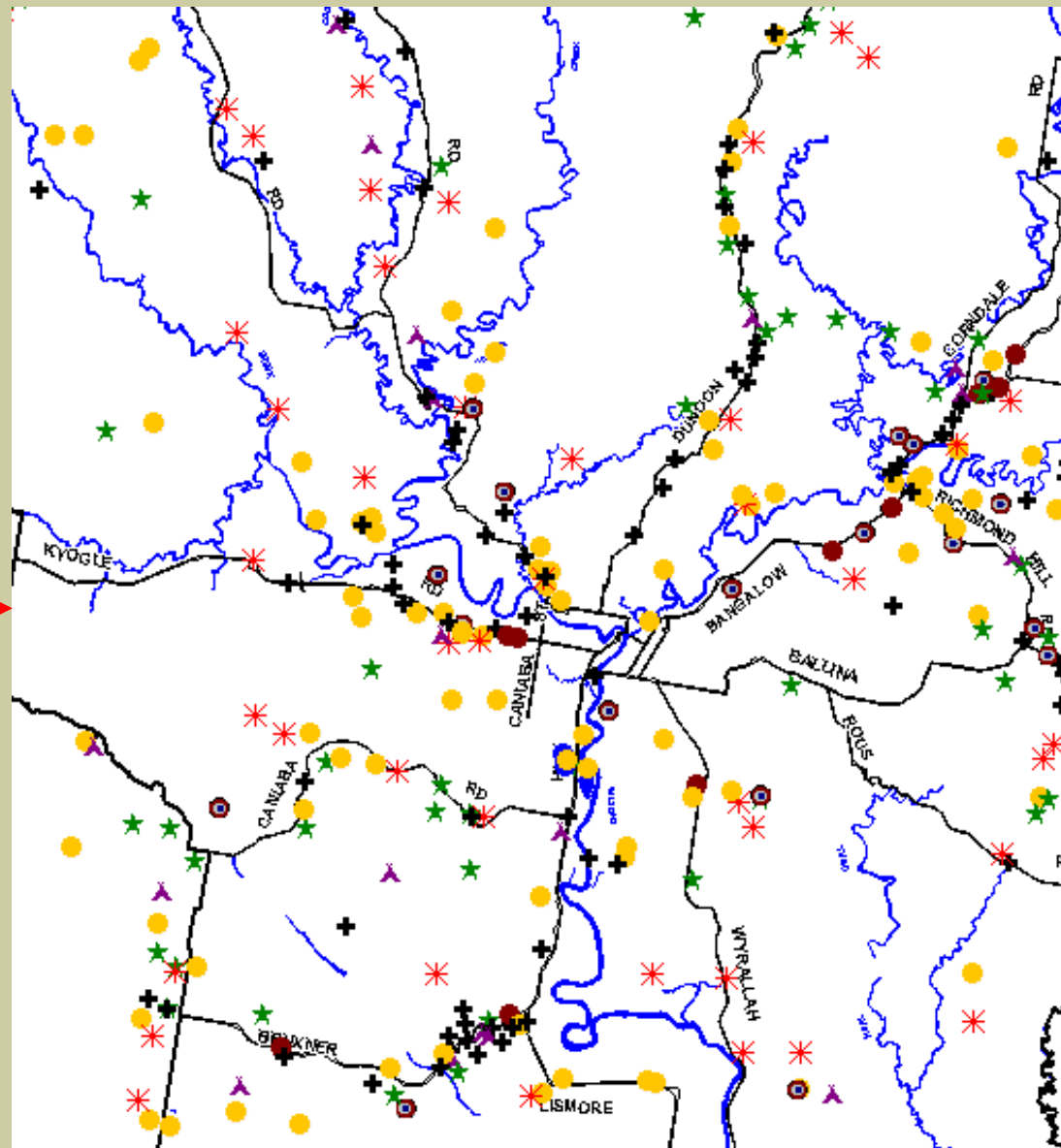




# Mapping fire ignitions

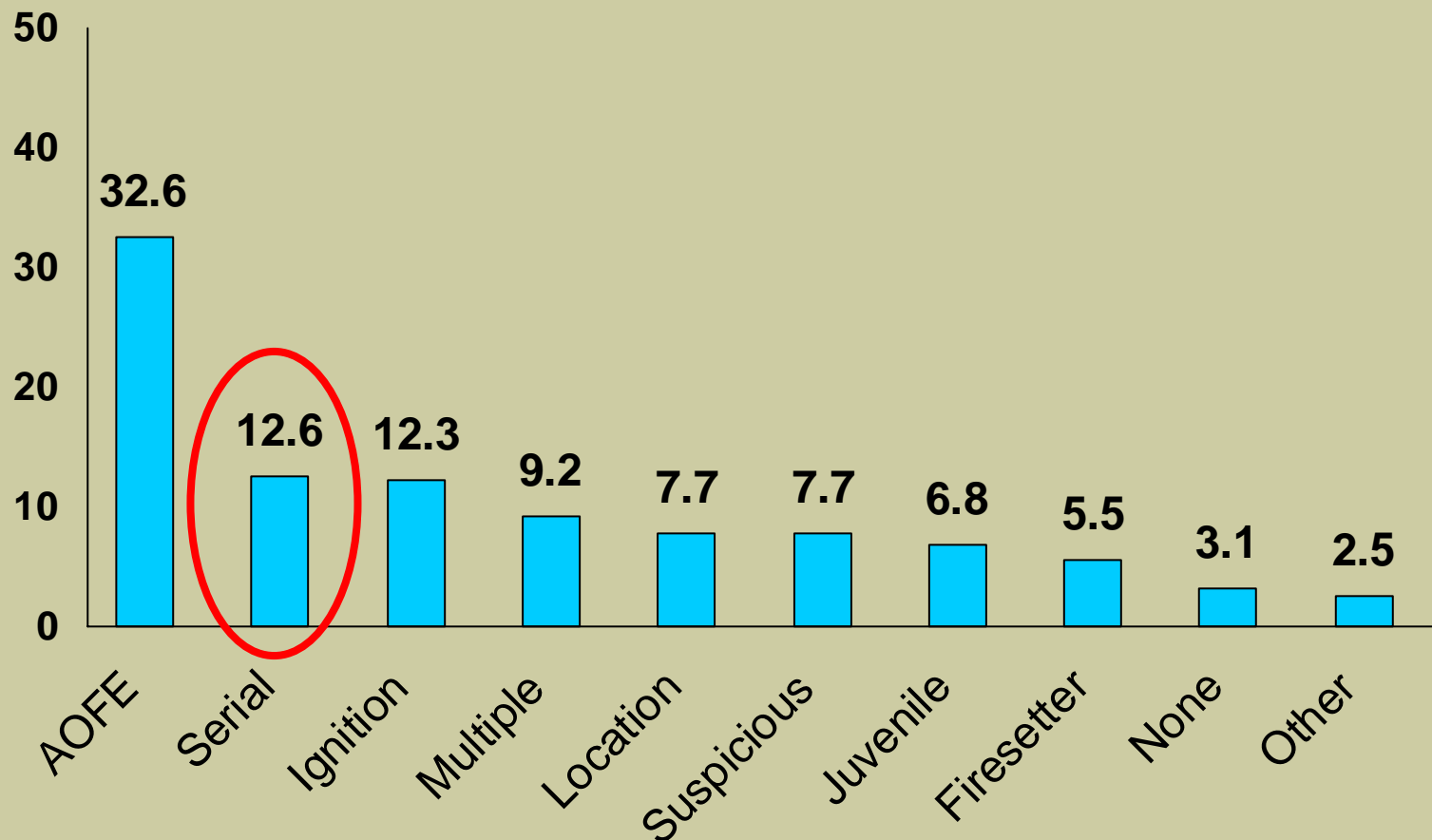


- ✚ MVA
- ✚ STRUCTURAL
- ✚ BUSH
- GRASS
- ★ HAZARD REDUCTION
- HAZMAT
- CANE FIRE(Uncontrolled)
- ✚ SEARCH/RESCUE
- CAR FIRE



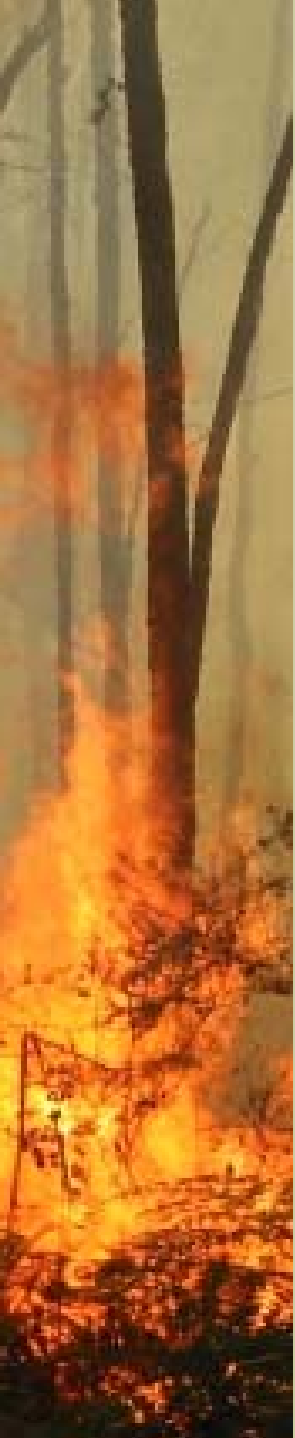
# Serial bushfire arson?

Causes of deliberate bushfires - NSW



# 'Ben' - serial bushfire arsonist

- 20 year old
- Convicted:
  - 25 fires
  - 2 hoax calls

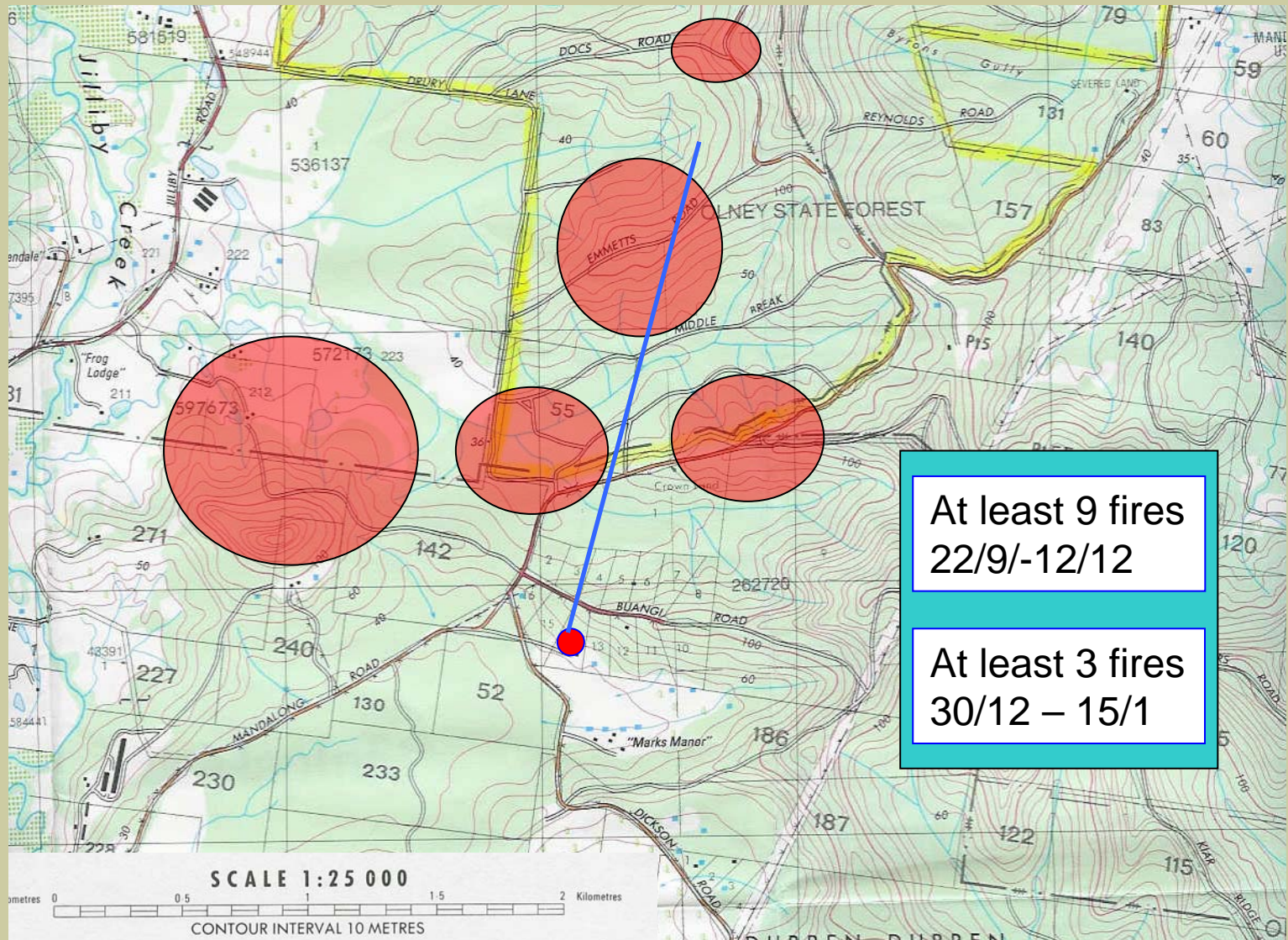


# Ben's fires



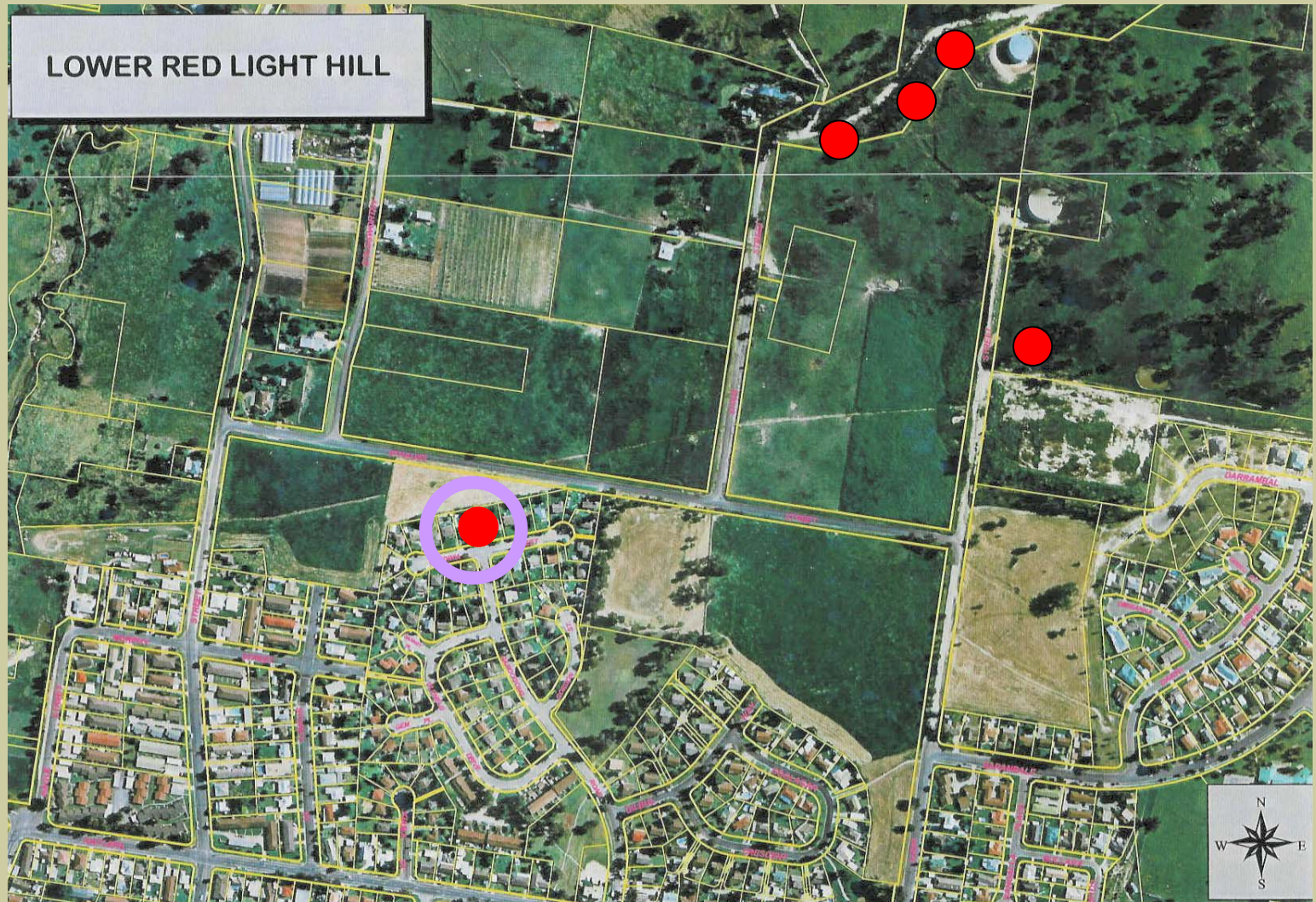


# Ben's fires - Dooralong





# Ben's home town fires



# Ben's fires - Lapstone







# Applications of current work

- **Targeting & informing**
  - education
  - prevention
  - justice responses
    - police
    - courts
    - corrections / juvenile justice





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