Southern Gulf NRM

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Planned burns to protect biodiversity, country and livelihoods

What looks like smoke from a distance is actually a carefully coordinated effort to protect livelihoods, landscapes and a species unique to the Southern Gulf.

Community members may notice smoke in the Mount Isa region next week while controlled burns are underway.

A coordinated program of planned, low-intensity burns is being carried out across properties just north of Mount Isa in the next week as part of a broader effort to improve outcomes for the endangered Carpentarian Grasswren and support to pastoralists managing fuel loads.

The program builds on previous years of collaborative work funded by Glencore's Community Assistance Program which brings together Southern Gulf Natural Resource Management and landholders with a shared goal of reducing wildfire risk while protecting important ecological values.

Frequent, low-intensity fire used by Traditional Owners for thousands of years, is the fire regime that the endangered Carpentarian Grasswren is adapted to. In contrast, large, hot wildfires like those seen in the last few years threaten both grasswren habitat and grazing assets such as pasture, fences and infrastructure, highlighting the strong alignment between species conservation and grazing outcomes.

Project Officer Lyndy Skea said fire has always been a fundamental part of managing the spinifex country. "*By keeping fuel loads down through controlled burning, we can help to protect pasture, livelihoods and infrastructure, while also ensuring important native species that belong here continue to thrive*."

This small, ground-dwelling bird relies on a mix of older and new growth spinifex for protection, nesting and feeding. Carefully planned burns create this patchwork of different vegetation ages, helping to maintain suitable habitat and support long-term survival of the species.

Burn operations are only carried out when seasonal conditions support safe and predictable fire behaviour. Following recent rainfall, conditions have aligned to allow operations to proceed, with extensive planning and risk assessments completed in advance under the guidance of the project team.

Burning is being conducted using helicopters fitted with aerial ignition machines to conduct controlled burns in remote areas. The system drops small incendiary capsules that ignite shortly after landing, allowing precise, low intensity fires to reduce fuel loads and which supports the protection of the bird and its habitat.

Aerial imagery and other monitoring tools are being used to track fire extent and outcomes across the landscape. Post-fire monitoring will be undertaken in coming months to assess ecological outcomes, including the response of the Carpentarian Grasswren and its spinifex habitat.

If anyone from the community has any questions regarding the planned burns, then please contact Lyndy Skea from Southern Gulf NRM or lyndy.skea@southerngulf.com.au

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Photo Credit: Clint Hook

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Southern Gulf NRM is the Natural Resource Management organisation for the Southern Gulf region of north west Queensland. We work with the community to deliver projects that improve and protect our region's natural resources and to maintain the prosperity of industries that rely on these. The Southern Gulf water catchment region includes all the land whose creeks and rivers run into the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. This encompasses an area of 215,000km square^2.