

MEDIA RELEASE

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



\$440,000 grant fuels fire research

Harm to human health from fire on the most fire-prone continent on earth – Australia - will be investigated by the University of Tasmania.

The research project, which could shape policy and procedures, has been made possible through a \$440,000 funding allocation from the Australian Research Council's Linkage Project Scheme.

A team of ecologists and epidemiologists will now start ranking the importance of air pollution on health against planned and spontaneous bushfires, wood heaters and agricultural burning.

The study will involve cities and regional towns in Tasmania (Launceston and Hobart), New South Wales and Western Australia.

School of Plant Science Professor David Bowman said this research would build on his previous work in Darwin where a link had been proven between bushfire smoke, even at levels below air quality guidelines, and hospital admissions for several respiratory diseases.

The Darwin study found that even small rises in pollution were associated with marked deterioration in asthma control and the need for additional medication.

Prof. Bowman said although climate change was expected to increase severe wildfires, deliberate exposure of urban areas to particles from frequent, low-level pollution must be explored.

“In terms of absolute Australian emissions, landscape fires are the nation's largest source of biomass smoke,” Prof. Bowman said.

“It is fair to say that in Australia biomass smoke pollution is currently a sleeping issue that has the potential to radically transform approaches to landscape fire management.

“Clearly given the prominence of bushfires and climate change in public environmental debates, our research is in the national interest.”

The 2002 study of fire smoke pollution in Darwin found a positive statistical association between smoke pollution at levels below accepted Australian air quality standards and admissions to hospital for asthma.

The three-year study will result in new and additional protocols for landscape fire management and deliver policy recommendations regarding other sources of biomass smoke pollution.

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