Kimberley Land Council

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KLC puts Aboriginal fire management on the world stage

Kimberley Aboriginal people’s methods of traditional fire management and rights to continue the practice will be discussed at a global meeting of Indigenous peoples in Marrakech next week.

Kimberley Land Council Chief Executive Officer, Nolan Hunter, will be speaking at the UNESCO Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Change conference (2 to 3 November), part of COP 22, about the world leading fire prevention methods of Kimberley Aboriginal people, as well as the challenges ahead.

Mr Hunter said the conference is an important opportunity to highlight how a greater uptake of traditional fire management – which reduces fuel loads by burning in the cooler early months of the year – can lead to a reduction in wildfires locally and globally, helping to cut world carbon emissions.

He said the forum also provides a chance to highlight attempts by the Western Australian Government to limit Traditional Owners’ ability to continue traditional burning practices on native title land.

“For the past month the Kimberley has been burning, ravaged by a wildfire that has destroyed more than 1.5 million hectares of country and habitat,” Mr Hunter said.

“In the Kimberley, Aboriginal rangers and Traditional Owners conduct a specialised type of early dry season fire management to reduce fuel loads across the landscape and the likelihood of exactly this type of uncontrolled wildfire.

“But despite national and international recognition of our methods, we continue to see efforts to weaken Aboriginal people’s rights to conduct this type of work in Western Australia.

“Currently, the State Government is trying to force Kimberley native title holders to enter into onerous legal contracts to conduct traditional fire management – something that is not required of other landowners.

“This is restrictive, increases red tape and is something that fundamentally Traditional Owners – who have exclusive possession native title – should not need to do.

“The State Government also asked the Commonwealth to cease funding for start-up carbon offset projects by Aboriginal landowners in the Kimberley, money which is vital for the continuation of traditional burning.

“We work collaboratively with government and non-government agencies, as well as pastoralists on the ground to prevent and fight fire, so it is disappointing that this is not reflected at a higher level.

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“If Aboriginal rangers are supported to conduct more early, dry season cool fire burning we can work together to prevent and manage these types of large wildfires in the future.”

Mr Hunter said traditional fire management is one of the best examples of Indigenous-led conservation and should be supported at a state level as it is nationally and internationally.

“Our methods are proven to reduce the risk of wildfires and cut carbon emissions, as well as having many social, cultural and economic benefits,” he said.

“This is the message that we want to share with the world, so that more people can benefit from traditional fire management, improving the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for years to come.”

The call for more support of traditional fire management follows the release of a global Oxfam report revealing the multiple attempts by the Western Australian Government to weaken Aboriginal people’s native title rights, including the ability to conduct traditional fire management.

The Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Change conference is being held from 2 to 3 November 2016 and is an opportunity for Indigenous people to share knowledge about climate change and discuss solutions for the future.

The Kimberley Land Council has been sponsored by Qantas, Oxfam and the Australian Conservation Foundation to participate in the COP 22 and side events.