

FOREST FIRE VICTORIA NEWS

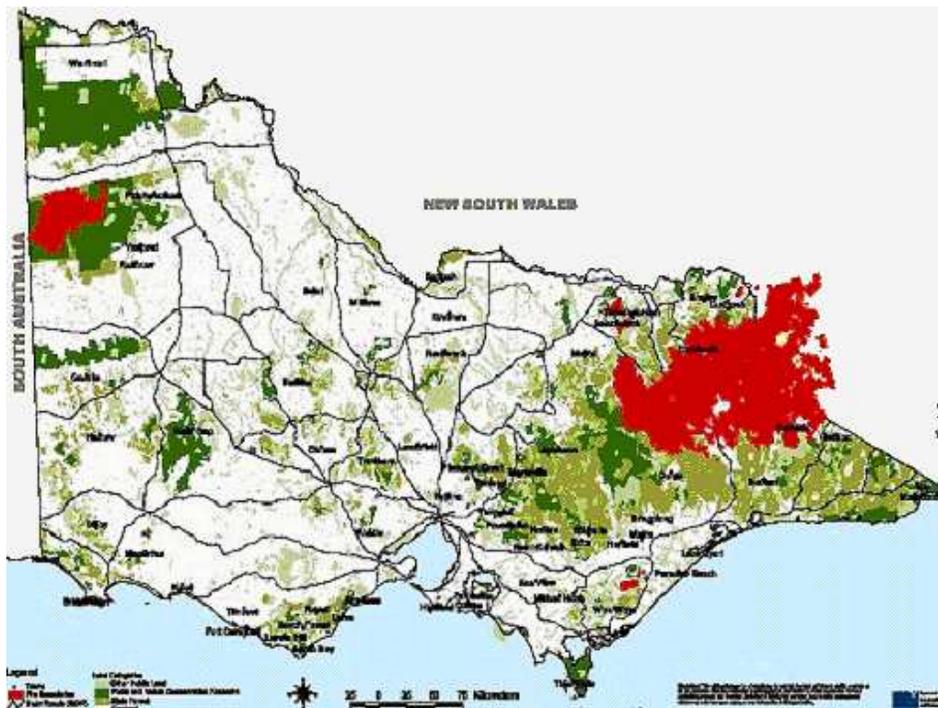
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This newsletter summarises the 173 page paper. To download the entire text, see instructions at the end of this newsletter.

"The Facts Behind the Fire"

A Scientific and Technical Review of the Circumstances surrounding the 2003 Victorian Bushfire Crisis.

by Barrie Dexter and Athol Hodgson



Forest Fire Victoria Inc. is an organisation of professional practitioners and scientists with, collectively, over 400 years of practical experience of forest fire management. Its purpose is:

- To provide and promote independent and expert opinion on forest fire management;
- To ensure that Victoria's forest fire management policies and practices are based on science, experience and accountability, and that they address social, economic and environmental values of natural ecosystems; and
- To ensure that the long-term well being and safety of forest ecosystems and their surrounding rural communities are protected.

OUR REVIEW SAYS:

We believe the 2003 Alpine fires were a disaster. For Victoria, and the alpine region of southeast Australia, these fires were the most disastrous and most contentious forest fire prevention and suppression failure since Black Friday 1939.

Why the 2003 Alpine fires were a disaster.

Local communities came under extreme threat and suffered short and long term losses. **Page 23.**

A reduction in water yields will mean that Commonwealth and State Government commitments under the National Water Initiative, including the Living Murray Initiative, Victoria's new water initiatives and return of additional water to the Snowy River cannot be met. **Pages 27, 28, 29.**

Valuable and scarce timber was lost. **Pages 24, 25, 26.**

There was massive soil movement. **Page 21.**

Abrupt and very long term if not permanent ecological changes occurred. **Page 22.**

None of this damage/loss occurred on forests burnt in benign fire weather between January 7/8 when lightning started the fires and January 17th 2003. **Pages 21, 55, 56.**

The initial response to the fires failed.

The failure to contain some of the fires before the onset of severe fire weather had a profound effect on subsequent options for their control. **(Page 62)** This is graphically illustrated in Figure 4.5.1, which depicts the rapid spread of the fires between days 8 and 16. (Source: DSE narrative Figure 27.) This is in stark contrast to the fire event in 1985 described in Chapter 3, Section 2. **Pages 43, 44 and Table 4.5.1 page 63.**

We believe that under the fuel loadings likely to be encountered in the alpine fire area and the actual maximum daily Forest Fire Danger Ratings (FFDRs) shown in Table 4.2.1, **(Page 56)**, which in the high country were mostly in the low (0-5) to moderate (5-12) range there was a 'window of opportunity' lasting up to 9 days for fast, aggressive attack to bring the fires under control. **Pages 56, 57.**

Consistent with fire-fighter safety, the top priority within the window of opportunity that usually follows the passage of a storm front is to quickly bring the fires under control and contain them until they either burn out or are extinguished by rain. **Page 61.**

While the unit cost per hectare of having the capacity to control wildfires in the shortest possible time can be high; it incurs the least cost and least damage to the State's assets over the entire fire season cycle. **Page 63, 65.**

Reasons for the failure include:

The law currently compromises best practice forest fire management. Fire prevention and fire suppression are inextricably linked and whoever is responsible for fire suppression must be responsible and accountable for fire prevention. The idea that a park manager can use strategies that do not conform to best practice forest fire management or refuse to use strategies that do conform with best practice and yet not be accountable when the strategies contribute to poor forest fire management is absurd. **Pages 39, 40, 41.**

Government administrative arrangements also compromise best practice forest fire management. **(Page 40.)** A significant component of the forest fire prevention and suppression force personnel and resources are not under the Secretary Department of Sustainability and Environment's direct control. They are split between two Government Ministries, Environment (DSE and PV)) and Primary Industries (DPI). The Minister responsible for DPI also has responsibility for VicForests and private forestry activity. **Pages 40, 48, 49.**

DSE and its predecessors have undergone significant cultural and organisational changes over the past two decades. Concurrently, there has been erosion in technical expertise in natural resource management at executive level, accompanied by a severe downsizing in resources, staff and funding devoted to native forest management which is inseparable from forest fire management. **Pages 45, 46, 52.**

Forest fire management has been relegated from the primary responsibility of the Department and is no longer regarded as a full time core business. **Pages 52, 53.**

Post 2003, problems arising from legislation, administrative arrangements, policies and land use practices that compromise forest fire management have not been redressed.

The position of Chief Fire Officer has been abolished. New Branch functions and staff reporting relationships have further downgraded forest fire management. **Page 71.**

The creation of VicForests, the entity responsible for commercial forestry in Victoria, adds further complexity to organisational arrangements and reduced level of available resources. It is understood that some 96 of the 130 people employed by VicForests transferred from Forestry Victoria in DSE. Many of these people were highly experienced in forest fire management and have not been replaced. **Page 68.**

The origin of the Wilsons Promontory fire was a 20 hectare prescribed burn lit on Monday 21st March 2005. It subsequently burnt more than 6000 hectares.

DSE has obviously not heeded the lessons from the 2003 alpine fires by failing to effectively organise and resource its prescribed burning and wildfire control activities **Page 73**.

A new forest fire policy is needed that:

- Re-designates the Department of Sustainability and Environment as a Forest Conservancy with an unfettered charter to keep all public land, rivers and streams clean and running and forests healthy and diverse.
- Amends Section 62 of the Forests Act to provide:
"Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other Act or law it shall be the duty of the Conservator to carry out proper and sufficient work to manage fires to protect water catchments and sustain the health and biodiversity of forests, regenerate disturbed or degraded forests and to prevent and suppress unplanned fires on all public forests"
- Ensures that the Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land is an explicit statement of policy quantifying the Conservator's responsibilities, sets standards for the management of both prescribed fire and wildfires on public land and holds the Conservator accountable to the Parliament of Victoria;
- Elevates the office of Chief Fire Officer to the second rung of the Conservancy organisational structure;
- Provides sufficient resources with appropriate organisational arrangements to effectively enable the Conservator to discharge the responsibilities vested in the Forest Conservancy;
- Abolishes Vic Forests;
- Abolishes Parks Victoria; and
- Abolishes the role of DPI in Public Land Management.

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