



Forest Fire Victoria 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.

Information on our membership and modus operandi is available on our web site.

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What went wrong and why in 2003, 2005 & 2006

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Memorial Lecture Theme: **Can we prevent disaster fires in one of the most fire-prone landscapes in the world?**

2003 in summary. *A few fires in the Alpine area were not controlled in benign weather. The Government Inquiry into the fires and its Report were seriously flawed. They failed to link deficiencies in preparedness and firefighting with reduced resources, public land management practices and the way Government agencies go about their business. After the fires, the Government and the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) downgraded Victoria's ability to respond to forest fires even further.*

The 2003 Victorian Alpine fires started on January 7/8th when lightning ignited about 80 fires in national parks and State forests during the passage of a storm front. Over the next 59 days the fires coalesced and burnt approx. 1 million hectares of forested public land and 90,000 hectares of private land in Victoria and spread into NSW where they coalesced with fires that started during the same storm front.

It's not unusual for lightning to start many forest fires during the passage of a storm front. It happened on January 14/15th 1985 when it started 111 forest fires that burnt 150,000 ha. (50,000 ha in the Alpine area). (1) And also in February 1965 when lightning from one storm started about 90 forest fires that, together with another fire that started in grassland from another cause about a week later, burnt 300,000 ha of forest and 6,000 ha of grassland in north and east Gippsland.

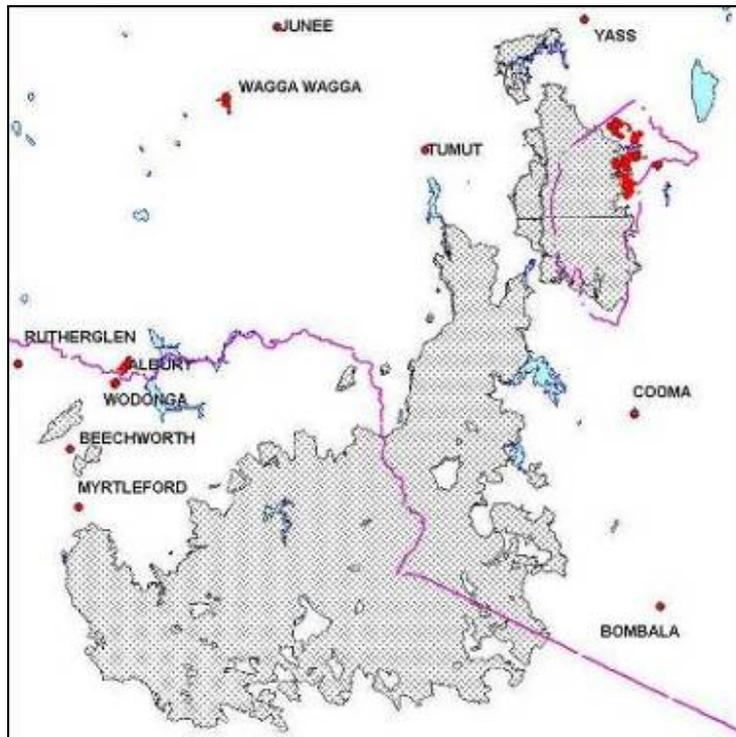


Figure 1: Area burnt in 2003 by “alpine fires” in Victoria, NSW and ACT

On 31 July 2003 the Premier speaking with Jon Faine on ABC Radio 774 said *“In fact, I think we were the best prepared we have ever been in Victoria’s history to fight fires.”* This political response to the fires denied facts. The fire event in 1985 when lightning started 111 fires in a pattern similar to the fire event in 2003 proves the point. The Alpine area at that time was drought affected, the firefight lasted just 14 days and confined the fires in the Alpine area to 50,000 ha. without the help of rain. It involved 2,000 Departmental, 500 CFA, 449 Armed Services, 120 timber industry and 50 SEC personnel; 75 bulldozers, 400 fire tankers and 36 aircraft. Compared to 2003, the cost and damage was miniscule.

The truth is that in 1985 Victoria was far better prepared to fight fires than in 2003. In 1985 the community was well connected to the forests and a large workforce of experienced firefighters worked in the forests. It included people working on hydro-electricity projects; tree fellers, sniggers and log carters employed by the timber industry; graziers; forest workers building fire access tracks, maintaining roads and tracks, and picking seed for forest regeneration and forest officers supervising forest licensees, forest works and planning autumn prescribed burning for forest regeneration and fuel reduction. That workforce and the vehicles and equipment it used daily in the forests was immediately available for firefighting on 14 January 1985. A workforce of similar size and experience in fighting fires in the Alpine forests was not immediately available for fire fighting in January 2003 despite the early warning of an impending severe fire season.

More than half (527,100 hectares) of the “treed” forest in Victoria affected by the 2003 Alpine fires was burnt by fire intense enough to severely scorch the crowns of all the trees or burn their crowns right off. That all happened on only 4 of the 59 days the fires burned. On

those 4 days the fires were feral, burning large areas with an intensity and uniformity that is alien to the natural processes that forests require for their health, diversity and sustainability. The fire weather was severe and the fires burnt fuels that had accumulated over decades where natural fires had been deliberately extinguished and little or nothing had been done to reduce those accumulating fuels by planned burning or any other means in less dangerous times. Two damning reports of the Auditor-General reveal that between 1988-89 and 2001-02 DSE never achieved its annual burning targets. (2). (3).



Figure 2: Mixed species Eucalypt forest burnt in severe fire weather, 30 Jan 2003. Photo; A. Hodgson.

During the 2003 Alpine fires the Media reported a chorus of allegations including negligence associated with land management practices particularly access and hazard reduction in parks and State forests, tardy initial response to some fires and sidelining of experienced local volunteers and their equipment during the firefight. There were many calls for a judicial Inquiry. Against that background Premier Bracks instigated an Inquiry he called “independent” conducted by a Panel comprising the Emergency Services Commissioner, Mr Bruce Esplin (chair) and two ecologists. The Inquiry’s terms of reference did not include land management practices (other than hazard reduction) on parks and State forest and did not allow public hearings of submissions.

The Panel produced an Interim Report in August 2003 and a Report titled **Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires** in October 2003. (4) (Esplin 2003 Report) The Report contains gross errors of fact, omitted evidence germane to crucial issues, contains statements that contradict conclusions and committed scientific heresy. One example, **“This Inquiry did not follow a failure.”** (Executive Summary, page xxxv) Science says that burning a large contiguous area of forest in a short time frame reduces biodiversity, (the variety of native organisms from tall tree species to microbes; from genes to ecosystems). And this fire was in many places, very intense. So intense that soils were exposed, made unstable and flowed as mudslides after storms. Ash, sediment, debris and other matter was washed from burnt catchments into town water supplies and made them

unfit for domestic use. The mind boggles at what had to happen before the Panel would call the fire event a failure.



Figure 3: Mud and rock slide. Upper Buckland River. 2003. Photo. Border Morning Mail



Figure 4: Ash and sediment deposited in Tambo River. 2003. Photo. Rex Candy

The Panel also reported ***“We found no evidence of substantial organisational or systemic failure”*** (Executive Summary, page xxvii). A large amount of written evidence to

the contrary was given to the Inquiry and evidence has been compiled and published since. (5). (6). (7).

Allan Myers QC, an eminent jurist and landowner in western Victoria acquainted with Victoria's bushfire potential assessed the Inquiry and its Report. (8). His assessment was done pro-bono and at the request of the Stretton Group, a disparate association of volunteers who support the protection of the natural environment through greater transparency of the public sector processes involved. The assessment concluded that the establishment of the Inquiry and the procedures followed in the conduct of the inquiry were seriously flawed and that the Report is correspondingly flawed in its conclusions and recommendations. Allan Myers QC said in support of his conclusion:

"Sound process in the conduct of an inquiry is an assurance as to reliability of outcome, but if the process is unsound one can have no confidence in the conclusions of the inquiry. Clause 1.17 of the Esplin Report, under the heading "How the Inquiry was conducted", says "the Inquiry members approached the task with no pre-determined view about the eventual finding". Nonetheless, I have been informed that, before the Esplin Inquiry began, the Minister for Emergency Services, Mr. Haermeyer, in an interview with Jon Faine of ABC Radio 774, made a public statement along the lines that the Esplin Inquiry would show that the State Emergency and Firefighting Services did an excellent job controlling and suppressing the 2003 Victorian bushfires. Clause 1.26 asserts the independence of the Esplin Inquiry from Government, but clause 1.17 states that the secretariat for the Esplin Inquiry was located within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, without describing, for example, the role of the secretariat in advising the members of the Esplin Inquiry or in drafting the Esplin Report.

Mr. Esplin was Emergency Services Commissioner for Victoria during the 2002-2003 fires the subject of the Esplin Inquiry. The Esplin Inquiry dealt explicitly with the Victorian Emergency Services role in fighting the 2002-2003 Victorian fires: see, for example, chapters 16 and 18 of the Esplin Report. Thus, Mr. Esplin was not, and did not appear to be, independent in relation to the matters inquired into."

And:

"The terms of reference for the Esplin Inquiry were deficient, being too vague, generalized and unfocussed and, at the same time, too narrow. The report upon those terms of reference was correspondingly vague, generalized and unfocussed and failed to address important environmental and economic consequences of the fires, including the effect of the fires upon water catchments. Matters which the terms of reference ought to have addressed, in addition to the economic and environmental consequences of the fires, include land use practices of Parks Victoria, forest husbandry practices in Victorian State forests and specific steps which could have been taken to control and extinguish the fires but which were not taken, or not taken in a timely manner"

And:

"The executive summary concludes with a statement that the authors have "nothing but praise for ... [the] efforts of the many firefighters and support staff". This statement is at odds with many findings of the Esplin Report which identify fire-fighting efforts that deserve condemnation rather than praise: see, for example, the findings in chp. 20 of the Esplin Report. It is also at odds with the preponderance of submissions as, for example, analysed and summarized in chp. 5 of the Esplin Report"

And

"Thus, notwithstanding the many critical submissions about the conduct of the Firefighting efforts in north east Victoria and the conclusions reached by the members of the Esplin Inquiry quoted above, the Esplin Report states that, in substance, nothing was seriously amiss in the fire fighting efforts and those on command

had difficult decisions to make which with the benefit of hindsight one could not say were definitely wrong. No specific recommendations are made concerning the way in which fire fighting strategy should be improved, local knowledge should be used or indeed any other matter which touches upon the widespread criticism of the way in which the 2003 fires were fought. The language of para. 20.25 quoted above is designed to deflect and dilute criticism and stands in contrast with the serious deficiencies in firefighting efforts already identified.”

Forest Fire Victoria Inc, published a scientific and technical Review of the circumstances surrounding the 2003 Alpine fires. (9) The Review was compiled by Barrie Dexter and myself and focused on the first week the fires burned. In that first week the weather in the Alpine area was benign. (10)

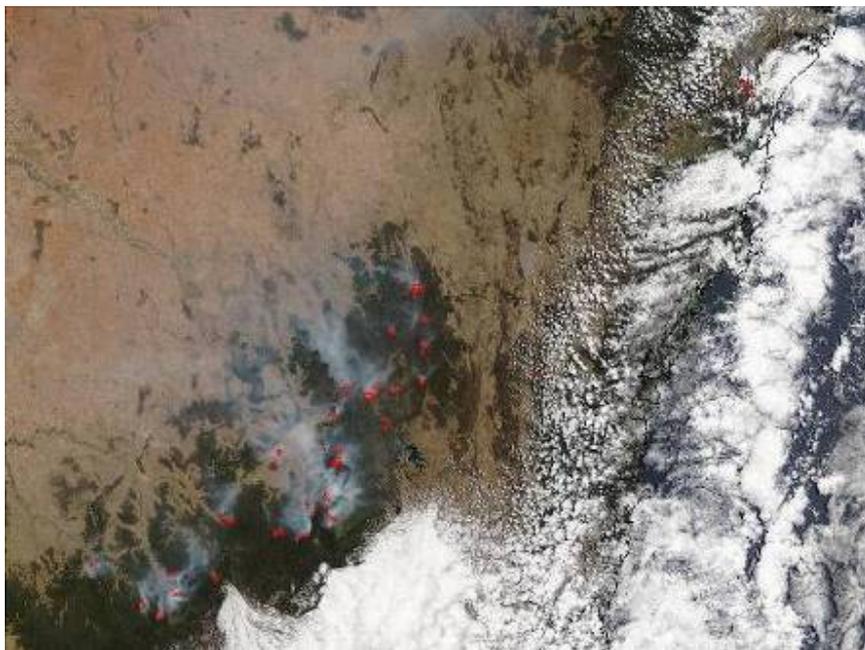


Figure 5: Alpine fires burning in benign weather 1100hrs. 10 Jan 2003. MODIS satellite image

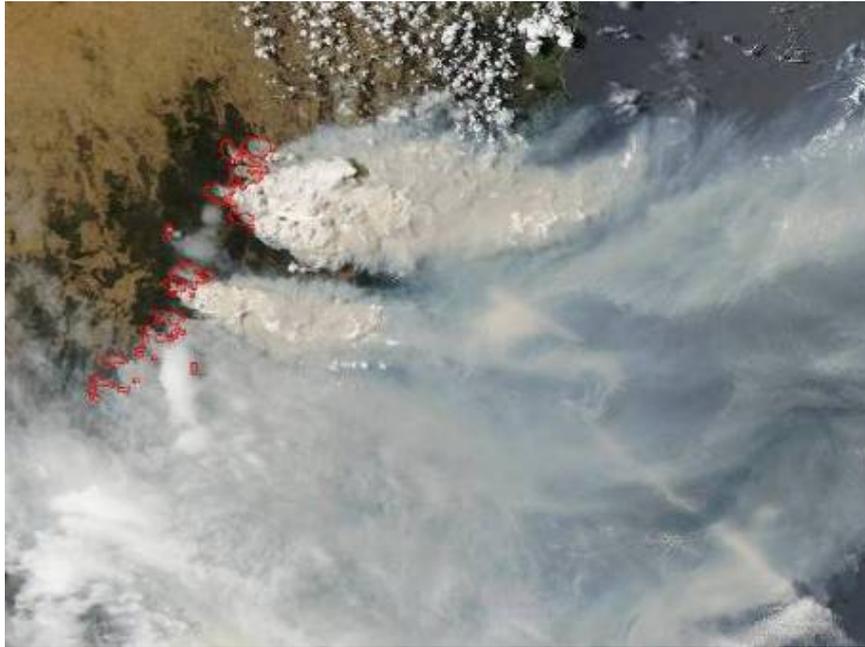


Figure 6: Alpine fires burning in severe fire weather. 1430hrs.18 Jan. 2003.MODIS satellite image.

Our Review found:

- None of the severe damage/loss occurred on the first 9 days when the weather was benign.
- 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. This is graphically illustrated in Figure 4.5.1, in our Review that 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.of our Review.
- 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, 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.
- The Esplin 2003 Report failed to include the 1985 Alpine fire event in its summary of significant fire events on all land across Victoria from 1851 to 2003. (pages 9,10 and 11.) The Panel knew of the 1985 event but for reasons not explained, lists for 1985 only those fires that burnt private lands. The Panel ignored an opportunity to benchmark 2003 performance against performance in 1985.
- The Inquiry benchmarked performance in 2003 with performance in 1939 and Ash Wednesday 1983. The events in 1939 are not a valid benchmark. At that time many people lived at sawmills deep within forests, there was no planned prescribed burning in forests, firefighters used rudimentary equipment and their efforts were not coordinated. The drought was worse than in 2003 and the fire weather on 13

January 1939 the day most damage occurred, was far worse than on any day during the January 2003 fires. For two months prior to 13 January 1939 there were hundreds of fires burning unchecked on forested and partly cleared private lands near State forests. Lightning did not start the fires. Judge Stretton sitting as a Royal Commission inquiring into the 1939 fires said, *"These fires were lit by the hand of man"*. Neither is Ash Wednesday 1983 a valid benchmark for comparing 2003 performance. Lightning did not start the Ash Wednesday fires. Most started outside forests when the fire weather was extreme and most of the damage they caused occurred on the day they started.

- 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.
- Government administrative arrangements also compromise forest fire management. A significant component of the forest fire prevention and suppression force personnel and resources are not under the Secretary, DSE's direct control. They are split between two Government Ministries, Environment (DSE and Parks Victoria (PV)) and Primary Industries (DPI).
- Prior to 2003 DSE and its predecessors underwent significant cultural and organisational changes over two decades. Concurrently, there was 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.
- Forest fire management was relegated from the primary responsibility of the Department and is no longer regarded as a full time core business.

Our Review also found that post-2003, problems arising from legislation, administrative arrangements, policies and land use practices that compromise forest fire management has not been redressed. In fact they got worse. Encouraged perhaps by the lack of criticism in the Esplin 2003 Report, DSE abolished its Fire Management Branch and expunged the word "fire" from corporate documentation and discussion. The duties and responsibilities of the Chief Fire Officer were split into four Directorates with the incumbent occupying one as Director, Emergency Management. These new functions and staff reporting relationships further downgraded forest fire management. The creation of VicForests, the entity responsible for commercial forestry in Victoria and under the Ministerial control of the Treasurer and the Minister for Agriculture added further complexity to organisational arrangements and reduced level of resources readily available for firefighting. Ninety-six DSE staff were transferred to VicForests and not immediately replaced.

2005 in summary. *A prescribed burn in Wilsons Promontory National Park was poorly planned and after ignition, was not patrolled properly. Four days later it escaped, was controlled, and not patrolled properly. It escaped again 4 days later, was controlled, and not patrolled properly. It escaped a third time 12 days after the original ignition and burnt about 6,000 ha. before it was controlled 17 days later.*



Figure 7: Path of Wilsons Promontory fire, 21 March to 1 April 2005.



Figure 8: Wilsons Promontory fire 2 April 2005 viewed from 20 km. Photo. Pat Scala.

On 21 March 2005 a 20 ha prescribed burn was lit in Wilsons Promontory National Park. It escaped three times over a period of 12 days and triggered five Government Reports into the circumstances surrounding the events. (11). (12). (13). (14). (15).

Investigation Report: Planning & Implementation. Prescribed Burn Tidal Overlook 21 March 2005. (11), (Morgan Report) was commissioned by DSE's Director, Emergency Management (formerly Chief Fire Officer) and carried out by two experienced and trained fire investigators. It is an excellent forensic examination of how the prescribed burn was planned, implemented and how it and the subsequent wildfires escaped. Unlike some previous investigations and Reports into escape fires, (Cobaw 2003) (Billywing 2003) (Star Track 2004) (Sunset Wilderness 2004) (Barwon Downs 2004) that were not made public, the Morgan Report is a public document. It marked a defining point in transparency and accountability within DSE. And importantly, it set the agenda and standard for a report by Mr Bruce Esplin, Commissioner, Emergency Services into the Wilsons Promontory fire and prescribed burning. (12). (Esplin 2005 Report).

The Esplin 2005 Report says:

- *“Our examination found consistency in the factors that contributed to escapes from burns across the state. These factors include a departure from accepted practice, or from documented policies and procedures in the planning and implementation of the prescribed burn. The shortcomings contain some systemic and cultural components, and are not idiosyncratic or exclusively localized in nature”.*(para 17)
- *“Staff in partner organisations consider themselves as volunteers in fire activity and are reluctant to undertake higher level training”.* (para 29)
- *“There remains considerable community uncertainty about the effectiveness of the prescribed burning program, and what changes, if any have occurred in the amount of prescribed burning undertaken since 2003”.*(para 33)
- *“The separation of entities from the department into bodies such as Parks Victoria and ForestsVic. which have their own organizational imperatives and resourcing priorities has resulted in a disruption to the management of resources available for firefighting”.*(para 214).

The Esplin 2005 Report also recommended that *“fire management should be added as a core business”* in order to clarify, strengthen and document roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of DSE and its partner organisations in the prescribed burning program. (Recommendation IV)

Some heed was taken immediately of these findings and recommendations. The Incident Control System was adopted for the management of all fires, not just wildfires. A consultant was engaged by DSE to assist in the implementation of improvements resulting from previous reviews and recent incidents. (13). The Office of Director, Emergency Management was re-designated Director, Fire and Emergency Management with reporting relationships similar to those that existed in 2003. These actions reversed or are intended to reverse some of the downgrading of fire management mentioned earlier. There is no evidence yet that the recommendation that DSE add fire management as a core business has been heeded. The Secretary, DSE still gets advice from the Director, Fire and Emergency Management via 4 levels of bureaucratic filtering.

2006 in summary. *On the evening of Thursday 19 January, lightning started 4 fires in the Grampians National Park. One near Mt Lubra was not located by DSE until mid-morning on Friday 20 January and subsequently burnt 130,000 ha of national park and private property. The Government decided not to hold an Inquiry into the fire and the Coroner has not responded to a request to inquire into the deaths of two people who died in the fire. Confusion about the amount of fuel reduction burning done on public land continued. The Government failed again to meet its own burning target and made no provision in the Budget to make up the backlog of areas requiring fuel reduction.*

On Thursday 19 January 2006 lightning started four fires in the Grampians National Park. The Mt Lubra fire was located by DSE mid-morning on Friday 20 January by a reconnaissance aircraft. The fire was not controlled. In the 10 hours between 2pm and midnight on Sunday 22 January it burnt about 80,000 ha of National Park and adjoining private property. During that time two people died, 26 houses, 22 woolsheds, 2,600 beehives, 1,500 km of fencing, more than 60,000 farm animals and very significant quantities hay and pasture were destroyed. The numbers of native mammals and birds that died can only be guessed.

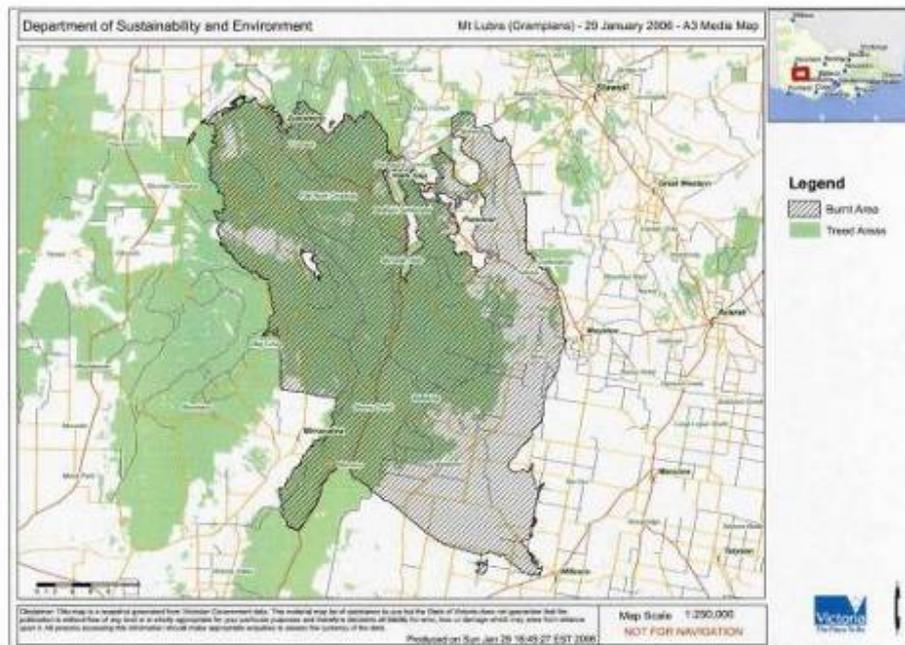


Figure 9: Area burnt by Mt Lubra fire Grampians area. 2006. Source: DSE



Figure 10: Mt Lubra fire.10.34 am 22 Jan 2006. Photo Peter Downes



Figure 11: Grampians National Park burnt on 22 Jan 2006 . Photo A. Hodgson.

The next day, Monday 23 Jan, while the fire was still burning, a media release from the Government's newsroom quoted the Premier as saying, "*Everyone involved in the firefighting effort had done a tremendous job----*" and the Emergency Services Minister as saying "*The combined efforts of the State's emergency services had been outstanding*".(16) These responses bear a striking

resemblance to responses made by the Premier and the Emergency Services Minister after the fires in 2003 and mentioned earlier in this paper. They suggest that our political leaders are continuing to deliberately avoid fair scrutiny of public land stewardship and fire management.

The Government announced it would not hold an Inquiry into the fire so there is no official information available that explains why it became so large. Crucial issues like whether or not the primary fire lookout at Reids Lookout was manned overnight or at first light on Friday 20; why reconnaissance aircraft did not locate the fire until mid morning the day after it started; the whereabouts on Thursday 19 Jan. of rapel crews trained to control fires in rough terrain and the method and timing of the first attack have not been addressed in public.

Anecdotes recited at a public forum organized by the Stretton Group to canvass views on public land stewardship and management of the Mt.Lubra fire and other fires in the Brisbane Ranges revealed some of the same problems identified four months earlier in the Esplin 2005 Report about the Wilsons Promontory fire. (12). The Stretton Group is seeking a Coronial Inquiry into the deaths of the two persons as a result of the Grampians fire and to investigate and make findings about whether persons charged with the responsibility for doing so carried out proper and sufficient work to prevent and suppress the fire that caused these two deaths. (17).

Community uncertainty identified in the Esplin 2005 Report about the effectiveness of DSE's prescribed burning program, including what changes, if any, have occurred in the amount of prescribed burning undertaken since 2003 also emerged after the Grampians fire. Minister Thwaites announced on Wed. 8. March 2006 that the Governments fuel reduction program was underway, with a target of burning 130,000 ha before winter. On 14 June 2006 DSE issued a Media release saying it was disappointed it had not achieved its fuel reduction target of 130,000 ha for the 2005-2006 financial year and had only managed 49,000 ha. DSE's web site said on that day that 110,000 ha had been burnt. A spokesman said the information was an innocent mistake, with figures for planned burns mixed up with those for completed burns. (The Age. June15). The mix-up resulted in a vast difference between the amount of burning actually done and the amount the community expected to be done and was told had been done. The DSE public website was re-jigged after the mix up was exposed but did not fix the problem. It still leaves the community uncertain about how much burning has actually been done.

The shortfall in prescribed burning for the full financial year 2005-2006 was about 80,000 ha. (130,000 less 50,000). The magnitude and significance of the shortfall was known when the forward estimates were submitted to Parliament in the 2006-2007 Budget. Some new funding (\$26.7 million over 4 years) was provided for fuel reduction burning and fire prevention but not enough to make up the shortfall. The 2006-2007 Budget target is 130,000 ha, the same as last year. (Budget Papers 2006-07. page 227.)

In failing to add the shortfall to the 2006-2007 target and provide sufficient funds to meet the increased target (210,000 ha) the Government has committed to a strategy that increases, rather than decreases the area and amount of hazardous fuels across forest landscapes. That is what happened for two decades prior to the 2003 fires. (2). (3). It inevitably leads to more large and intense fires that degrade the health and diversity of our forests and the sustainability of the social, economic and environmental values we derive from them.

Budget papers 2006-07 reveal that the number of DSE personnel with accreditation in a fire role fell from 1,546 in 2004-05 to 1,500 in 2005-06. On Thursday 21 September 2006 the Minister for the Environment announced that an additional 55 permanent DSE firefighters would be employed from October 2, as part of a Bracks Government 2004 budget commitment for an additional 200 firefighters. Arguably, the addition of 55 permanent firefighters does not lift DSE's capability to manage fire to the level that was found wanting in 2003. It certainly does not compensate for the skills and resources that were available from hydro-electricity projects, contractors and licensees that were lost post-1985.

2003 through 2006: Common factors.

- a lack of political will to face the obvious reality that the system is not working – in fact a “spin” approach that avoids and/or manipulates due process to make them (the government) look good even when they have failed miserably.
- an organizational structure of public land management agencies that downgrades the importance of fire in the landscape and a lack of will to fix the problem with clear and unambiguous lines of responsibility for fire prevention and suppression on public land.
- a firefighting approach that consistently avoided fast aggressive first attack and a reliance on “remote” firefighting.
- a lack of suitable, skilled and trained resources well versed in public land management and available all year round for fire related work.

Conclusion

Victoria's forest fire management is in a parlous state. The reasons lie in policy and political shortcomings at the highest level. The problem is not with the personnel on the fire-ground who do their best at a difficult and sometimes dangerous job. They are seriously hampered by lack of political support, absurd protocols and the problems identified in the Esplin 2005 Report. One answer lies not in learning to live with feral fires or how to respond to them better, but in finding ways to get the right kind of fire back into the landscape. Until Victoria gets some inspired leadership that recognizes the need to re-connect rural communities to our forests and parks and makes the system work better, feral fires will return and keep returning. The health of our water catchments and the bio-diversity and sustainability of our native forests are at risk, not from climate change, but from flawed policies and blinkered politics.

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