

Forest Fire Victoria Inc.

Forest Fire Victoria is a group of forest and fire professionals who have more than 250 years of fire experience.

Newsletter No 6

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AN INQUIRY.

THE BUREAUCRATIC ALTERNATIVE TO A REASONABLE OUTCOME

We ask an obvious question – why bother to repeat the fire science messages put to previous inquiries, only to see the same inherent failures in bushfire management and control emerge the following summer? Is this time going to be any different?

Yet again, in the summer of 2019/20, those with the statutory responsibility have failed to adequately protect the forests and people of this State from the ravages of summer bushfires. So what will happen to the outcomes of this Inquiry? Will it be any different from the inquiries that preceded it?

In the period 1939 to 2016 there have been 34 inquiries and reviews covering the prevention, suppression, planned use of fire and recovery from bush fires as listed below. Twelve of these inquiries have been conducted in the last decade.

This indicates that the government is using the inquiry process to evade public scrutiny and avoid making changes to established policy.

The only Inquiry that has had a lasting and positive effect on fire prevention and suppression organisation was the Stretton Royal Commission following the disastrous 1939 fires.

Even the Royal Commission following the “Black Saturday” fires of 2009, which made a large number of sensible recommendations, has had little positive effect on current fire prevention and suppression because some of the key findings have been subsequently altered or just ignored.

A glaring example is Recommendation #56 that required the Department to achieve a long term prescribed burning target of 5% minimum of public land. This has now been replaced by a “risk reduction” model which is known to have been developed in confidence by selected experts. Many experienced forest fire practitioners and fire scientists, recognised nationally and inter-nationally, regard the concept in its present form as seriously flawed. It is also interesting to note that the transparent reporting requirements of Recommendation #56 are not met.

How can it be that the clear advice of experienced forest fire professionals, practitioners and researchers across the nation, has been ignored to the detriment of our State. Perhaps the burdens of increasing bureaucracy, not upsetting vocal minority groups, fear of litigation and outrageous health and safety protocols that have severely compromised the ability of the workforce to make reasoned judgements on risk, have conspired to make scientific and sensible fire management nigh on impossible.

Forest Fire Victoria (Inc.) will again reiterate that fast, determined, and aggressive attack must be applied to EVERY fire, and fuels across the landscape must be systematically reduced if fires are to be effectively and efficiently controlled in the future.

Will the IGEM Inquiry go the same way as its predecessors, or will common sense and science prevail, so that Victoria can once again lead the world in bushfire management?

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Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
1939	Judge Stretton ⁽ⁱ⁾	Royal Commission into 1939 Victorian fires	Foundation for Forest Fire Management (1939)
1945	Judge Stretton ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾	Royal Commission into 1944 Victorian fires	Creation of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in 1945.
1977	Sir Esler Barber ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾	Municipal fire prevention arrangements	Revision of municipal fire prevention arrangements.
1982	Taskforce Report to Minister of Forests ^(iv)	Fire protection and fuel reduction burning by the Forests Commission, Victoria	Considered by Government in the formation of the mega Department of Conservation Forests and Lands.
1982	Taskforce Report to Minister of Forests ^(v)	Examine appropriateness of the organisational structure of the Forests Commission to meet current operational needs and to conform to Government policy	Considered by Government in the formation of the mega Department of Conservation Forests and Lands.
1983	S.I. Miller ^(vi)	Serious problems with fire co-ordination and fire response	Resulted in the Emergency Management Act (1986).
1983	FCVic Fire Protection Seminar ^(vii)	Review of forest fire protection strategy and techniques following the 1983 bushfires	Incorporate the lessons learnt into organisational structure and operational practice.
1984	Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands ^(viii)	Report of the Fire Protection Working Party – to investigate and report on matters relating to Fire Protection within the Department and a proposed structure for the Fire Protection Branch.	Identified matters for attention and organisational arrangements for effective and efficient forest fire management.
1985	Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands ^(ix)	Summary of Significant Events 1984/85 Fire Season. Presented to: Australian Association of Rural fire Authorities. Perth 6-9 May 1985.	Identifies the value of deploying sufficient number of well trained personnel and equipment to aggressively attack and control multiple fires.
1992	Auditor-General Victoria Special Report No. 16 Fire Protection ^(x)	Review to evaluate the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the Dept. of Conservation and Environment's management of its fire protection activities, embracing both fire prevention and fire suppression.	Identifies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest fire management as one of the most important responsibilities of Government • Quality of the Department's strategic management of fire protection, the appropriateness of current funding arrangements & the extent to which Parliament & the community are adequately informed on the management of fire prevention & fire protection in the State's forests, national parks & other protected public land • Shortcomings in the key elements of the Dept's fire prevention program that raise serious concerns about the State's firefighting capability in particular areas of the State.

Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
2002	Coroner Inquest. Linton Bushfire ^(xi)	Coronial Inquiry into the deaths of five volunteer CFA firefighters fighting a fire at Linton, near the City of Ballarat; December 1998.	<p>Recommendations for improved safety of all firefighters. Profound influence on the conduct of fire prevention and fire suppression operations.</p> <p>Annually, DSE and CFA jointly sign and widely promote to their respective workforces a Co-operative Agreement, a document with a strong operational and safety focus.</p> <p>Relevant occupational health and safety legislation recognise the Fire Ground as a 'workplace' and an Incident Controller as 'controlling' the workplace.</p>
2003	Department of Sustainability and Environment ^(xii)	The Victorian Alpine fires January – March 2003, Prepared by Kevin Wareing and David Flinn for Fire Management, Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003	<p>The overall conclusion is that forest fire management must receive a higher priority.</p> <p>Reforms must be carried out that involve maintaining an operating environment that addresses various constraints encountered during the 2003 alpine fires. These include OH & S issues, Departmental organisational arrangements, fire containment strategies in National Parks and funding for the training and retention of skilled Fire Ground firefighters.</p>
2003	Auditor-General Victoria ^(xiii)	<p>Fire prevention and preparedness</p> <p>This audit commenced prior to the fires of summer 2002-2003 and did not examine suppression operations. The audit focused on the planning, prevention and preparedness measures that can prevent or reduce the severity of Victoria's seasonal wildfires and on whether those essential planning and prevention measures are being effectively implemented.</p>	<p>Improvements in fire prevention & preparedness have been made since the audit of fire prevention on public lands in 1992, and the tragedy of the Linton Fire in 1998.</p> <p>Further work is needed in a number of critical areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a State wildfire safety strategy by the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner • Increased focus on strategic management of hazard reduction on public land to ensure that appropriate targets are set, resources are provided for their achievement and performance monitored.
2003	Esplin et al ^(xiv)	2002/2003 Victorian Fires	Accepted by Government for formulating Victoria's forest fire management policy and practice.
2003	Commonwealth Parliament (House of Representatives) <i>A Nation Charred</i> ^(xv)	2002/2003 Australian bushfires	Identifies critical needs for reform. The State of Victoria did not contribute to this inquiry.

Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
2004	COAG Council of Australian Governments ^(xvi)	Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management. Reported to the Prime Minister as the Chair of COAG on 2 April 2004 The report and COAG's response were released on 24 Jan 2005	The Inquiry responded to its terms of reference by focusing on the following themes: risk factors contributing to bushfires; bushfire mitigation strategies and their impacts; the impacts of bushfires on the environment, life, property and the economy; resources a infrastructure for fire mitigation and firefighting; efficiency of resource use a the best use of technologies; cooperation between agencies and jurisdictions; and examples of good practice.
2005	Barrie Dexter and Athol Hodgson. ^(xvii)	The Facts Behind the (Alpine) Fire 2003. A Scientific and Technical Review of the Circumstances surrounding the 2003 Victorian Bushfire Crisis.	Placed on record Forest Fire Vic's opinion that the 2003 Esplin Inquiry failed to rigorously investigate and address underlying problems with Victoria's fore fire management policy and practice. Recommendations were made to address problems.
2005	DSE (The fires at Wilson's Promontory NP in March-April 2005) ^(xviii)	Report into a prescribed burn ignited on 21 March 2005. Jarratt	In taking steps to reduce the fuel load in the Park, systemic problems were revealed dealing with compliance with practices and procedures; the state of preparedness in a number of crucial areas; effective supervision, management and leadership; and decision-making at key levels in the chain of command.
2005	Emergency Services Commissioner Esplin ^(xix)	Examination of Prescribed Burning Practices	The prescribed burning program is large complex and is implemented in the short windows of time each year when conditions are suitable, to enable safe and efficient burning in consultation with surrounding land owners and staff involved in delivering the program. Improving the Management of Fuel Reduction Burns.
2005	Parks Victoria ^(xx)	Prescribed burn Tidal Overlook 21 March 2005 Planning and Implementation	The investigation found deficiencies in the planning and execution of the Burn Plan and with the suppression of the fires that resulted on the 25th and 29th March.
2005	Parks Victoria ^(xxi)	Tidal River 1-2 April 2005 final Report. Review of Parks Victoria's Implementation of Emergency Management Procedures	17 Recommendations. Adjustments be made where necessary to the current Park Management Plan to reflect these recommendations. Responsibility for the implementation of these recommendations will be allocated to a member of the Parks Victoria Executive Team. This member should be held accountable for the implementation of all the recommendations.

Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
2005	Stuart Ellis ^(xxii)	Advice Internal report to Secretary DSE on Operational Fire Management	<p>This report may be viewed in part 3 (CD) of <i>Fire Management on Public Land - Victoria Burns While Its Bureaucracy Fiddles. Will Recent Legislative Changes to Crisis and Emergency Management Improve Fire Management on Victoria's Public Lands?</i> Dexter, B.D; A. Hodgson AM. (Jan.2015)</p>
2007	DSE Fire & Emergency Management ^(xxiii)	<p>This narrative provides an important formal record of the event known as the "Great Divide Fires of December 2006 – February 2007". It includes the climatic conditions which contributed to this event and the planning response to these. It also records some notable firefighting achievements including the extensive backburning used to prevent the fire from entering the Thomson River Water Catchment thereby averting both short and long-term water supply impacts on Victoria's capital city.</p>	<p>The authors believe that Government has a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to protect the Victorian community from the development of large forest fires and thereby minimise the known adverse and long-lasting impacts on social, economic, cultural and environmental values.</p> <p>This can be achieved by the adoption of appropriate measures of fire suppression and fire prevention using DSE's 365-day-a-year model within a land management framework that takes account of the threat of wildfire across all forested land tenures. In respect to the suppression of wildfires there is a need to substantially increase the number of firefighters with the skills and fitness required to work effectively and safely on fires in remote locations. The firefighting resources guide (McCarthy <i>et al.</i> 2003) provides a scientific basis for determining appropriate resourcing levels within a risk assessment framework.</p> <p>1 death (firefighter); 51 houses; 1741 stock; 1.3 million hectares burnt. The June/July 2007 Gippsland floods followed.</p>
2008	Environment and Natural Resources ^(xxiv)	Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria, June 2008. State Government of Victoria.	<p>That to lessen the impact of more frequent and intense fires, as predicted by climate change projections, a substantial and sustained increase in resources to conduct preventive activities will be needed. An increase in landscape scale prescribed burning, as recommended in Chapter Two, represents the key strategy for minimising the fire risks associated with climate change.</p> <p>In order to minimise the future risk of fire and facilitate the development of appropriate fire regimes, key bushfire management documents, for example, the Code of Practice and Fire Ecology Strategies, need to explicitly consider, and if necessary, incorporate, the potential impacts of climate change on bushfire.</p>

Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
2009	2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission ^(xxv)	7 February 2009 will be remembered as one of the darkest days in the state's memory of bushfire. One hundred and seventy-three people died, townships were destroyed, about 78 communities were affected, and 430,000 hectares were burnt.	<p>The Commission conducted an extensive investigation into the causes of, the preparation for, the response to and the impact of the fires that burned throughout Victoria in late January and February 2009.</p> <p>Commissioners concentrated on gaining an understanding of precisely what took place and how the risks of such a tragedy recurring might be reduced making 67 recommendations.</p>
2009	Peter Attiwill & David Packham, Tim Barker, Ian Hamilton ^(xxvi)	People's Review of Bushfires 2002 - 2007	Recommended that the grazing of domestic livestock on public land ... can be managed to reduce fuel loads.
2011	McCarthy et al. The Great Divide Complex of Fires ^(xxvii)	Analysis of the resourcing and containment of multiple remote fires: The Great Divide Complex of fires, Victoria, December 2006	<p>The quantity of firefighting resources required to contain all fires started from 66 lightning strikes across Victoria's Great Dividing Range within the first 4-6 days was calculated and compared with the quantity of resources actually deployed.</p> <p>The minimum of resources required was found to be substantially more than that available.</p>
2012	Dexter, B and A. Hodgson ^(xxviii)	Concerns about the organisational arrangements and related matters for effective and efficient forest fire management.	<p>Identifies fundamental issues described in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that remain unaddressed.</p> <p>The level of expertise and resources available to combat the fire threat remained in a worse condition than any time since the early 1980s.</p> <p>The report was referred to the then responsible portfolio ministers who passed in on to the Fire Services Commission for consideration.</p>
2013	Emergency Services Commissioner Michael Hallowes ^(xxix)	Harrieville Fire 2013 "Report of the Facts" on how the initial response to the fire was managed by DSE and the Country Fire Authority (CFA).	<p>Emergency Services Commissioner's key finding:</p> <p><i>'in my opinion there was no information to support the view that an increased weight of attack or a change of strategy and tactics on 21 and 22 January would have altered the outcome of the fire on 22 January 2013'.</i></p>

Year	Source	Subject Matter	Some Key Outcomes
2013	Phil Cheney, Barrie Dexter, Athol Hodgson AM, David Packham AOM ^(xxx)	An evaluation of the ESC Hallows' report into the Harrietville fire, January 2013. Are the findings consistent with all the facts?	Under the circumstances on the fireground there are strong reasons to consider that full advantage was not taken of the window of opportunity to contain and control the Harrietville fire in the first 24 hours.
2015	The Inspector General for Emergency Management ^(xxxi)	A general analysis of the initial response to the Wye River – Jamieson Track fire with a focus on the period 19 to 25 December 2015.	<p><i>"IGEM recognises the appropriately scaled approach to control and resource allocation throughout this fire.</i></p> <p><i>The effectiveness of strategy planning and implementation were highly likely to have contributed to the successful outcome of preserving life and minimising further losses.</i></p> <p><i>This achievement of the most important strategic control priority is a successful outcome for the community and the emergency management sector.</i></p> <p><i>IGEM supports the intent, rationale, decision process and implementation of the fire control strategies in order to reduce risk to communities"</i></p>
2015	Independent Lancefield-Cobaw Investigation Team - Murray Carter (Lead Investigator) ^(xxxii)	The Carter Report opens with a salutary reminder of the relevant legislation governing DELWP's responsibilities for forest fire management on public land.	Recommendation 3.1.3.1 a review of the organisation's structures and processes at state, regional and district levels should be undertaken to better integrate operational burn planning and operational burn implementation and to provide sound governance, risk management and quality control.
2015	IGEM April 2015 ^(xxxiii)	Review of performance targets for bushfire fuel management on public land.	<p><i>"IGEM recommends a risk reduction target as the most effective form of performance target for bushfire management on public land to protect life and property and guide investments in fuel reduction burning"</i></p> <p>but placed significant caveats on the adoption of this new approach, particularly on measuring success and core measures and complimentary measures on performance.</p>
2016	Dexter, B D; A Hodgson AM and Rod Incoll AFSM ^(xxxiv)	An Evaluation of Inspector-General for Emergency Management Review of The Wye River – Jamieson Track Fire and Related Matters. What are the real lessons learnt?	Notwithstanding that there was a highly successful evacuation of threatened Surf Coast communities and that the number one priority of preservation of life was fortuitously met; the evaluation concludes that there was a high probability that the fire could have been quickly brought under control.

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