

# Forest Fire Victoria Inc.

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

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## Preparedness Ahead of the 2019/20 Fire Season

The most powerful weapons in the land manager’s armory against bushfire are the management of the forest fuel hazard and the ability to quickly attack fires in their incipient stage.

The landholder owns the fuel and is responsible for timely preparedness to minimise the threat of fire. The public land manager, DELWP, while responsible for fuel management in State forest, national parks and protected public land, collaborates with the CFA; and is required to seek the agreement with Parks Victoria on fuel management on about half of Victoria’s public native forests.

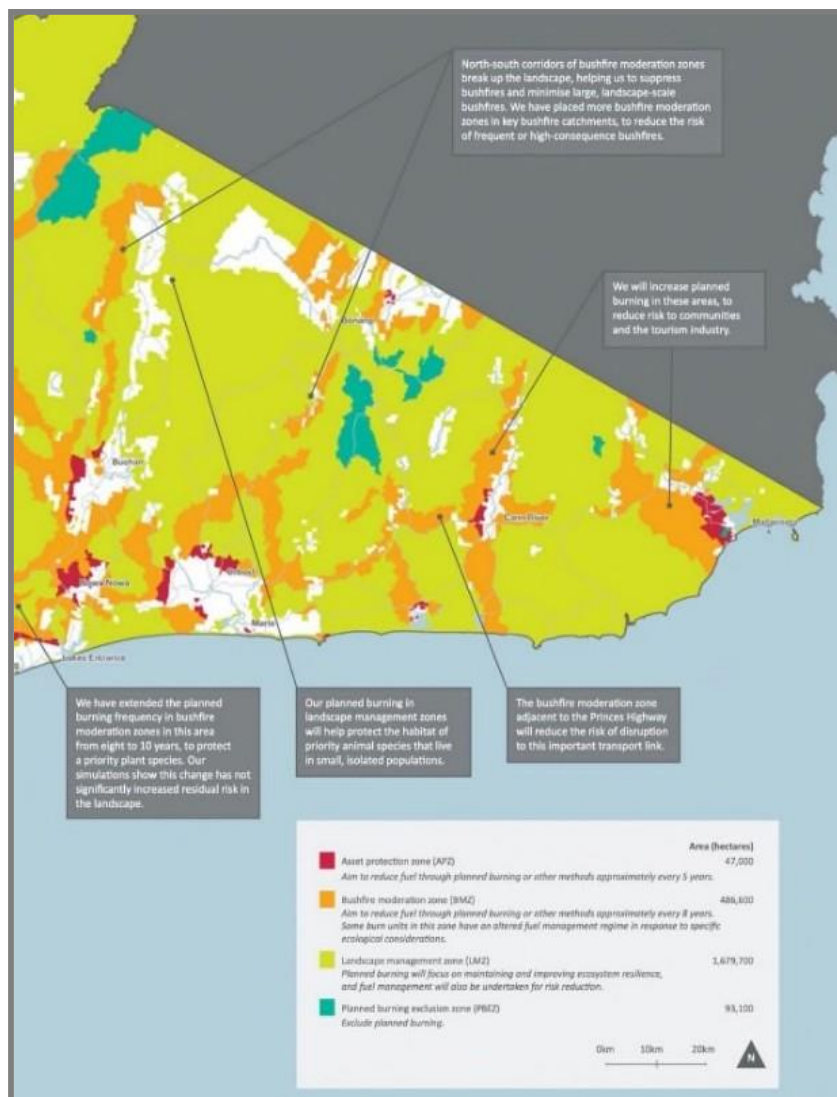


Figure 4 - Fuel management strategy  
Alpine and Greater Gippsland Strategic bushfire Management Plan p.16

The extent and quality of any burning achieved in these areas is not known, since DELWP no longer publishes its burning performance data. What does this lead you to believe?

**On behalf of the Community, Forest Fire Victoria Inc. demands that the Department be held fully and publicly accountable for its performance in prescribed burning on public land since landscape-scale prescribed burning is a vital mechanism for fire protection and suppression.**

As broadscale prescribed burning is the only effective mechanism for protection against forest fire, Forest Fire Victoria demands that the Department be held fully and publicly accountable for its performance in this key result area.

On the other hand, a statistic that is on the public record is the extent of bushfires in this area during 2019/20 fire season, shown in Figure 5. In addition to catastrophic damage to the public land estate, these fires caused significant stock and property losses and traumatised the residents of the entire East Gippsland area.

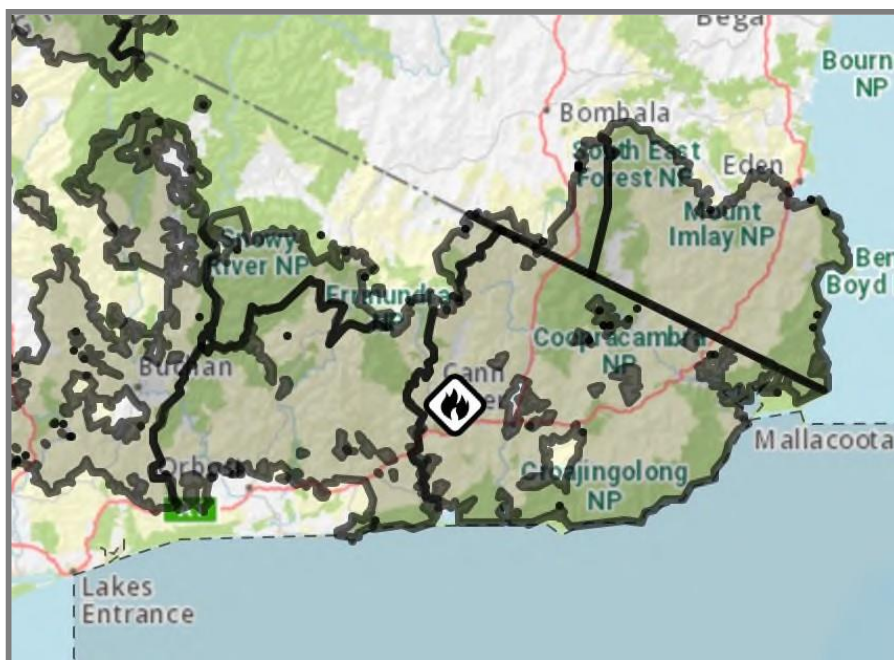


Figure 5 Area Burnt 2019/20 fire season – Emergency Management Victoria.

Fires burning in areas that have a reduced level of fuel hazard are much more likely to be contained than those that are burning in heavy fuels that are long unburnt, especially when fuel moisture contents are at historic lows due to drought conditions. Accordingly, Forest Fire Victoria calls for the revision of present policy so that the Landscape Management Zone is included in fuel reduction burning programs.

#### **Responding to bushfires**

Hot dry winds, periodic drought, and dry lightning strikes mean that multiple bushfires are inevitable in the remotest parts of Victoria's public lands. An enhanced rapid response capability in remote areas is crucial for successful first attack.

The following paragraph is an extract from DELWP's Alpine and Greater Gippsland Strategic Bushfire Management Plan:

"DELWP is responsible for suppressing fires in state forests and national parks, and on protected public land. To improve bushfire response, DELWP will:

- continue to provide an integrated response to bushfires with CFA and other emergency managers
- share bushfire risk assessment data and information with other fire agencies and land managers (such as PV, CFA, VicForests and private plantation owners) to support bushfire response
- continue to identify and validate our landscape's priority assets for protection.

This statement blurs the imperative for fast, direct and determined initial attack on all fires. It says nothing about crews regarding first attack as an urgent task, aimed at keeping the fire at a minimum area, or indeed, putting the fire out.

The State Strategic Control Priorities areas are stated as:

- Protection and preservation of life is paramount. This includes: Safety of emergency services personnel, Safety of community members including vulnerable community members, and visitors/tourists located within the incident area.
- Issuing of community information and community warnings detailing incident information that is timely, relevant and tailored to assist community members make informed decisions about their safety
- Protection of critical infrastructure and community assets that support community resilience
- Protection of residential property as a place of primary residence
- Protection of assets supporting individual livelihoods and economic production that supports individual and community financial sustainability
- Protection of environmental and conservation assets that considers the cultural, biodiversity, and social values of the environment.

During the 2019/20 fire season the approach of ignoring or not resourcing some of the small remote fires burning in environmental and conservation assets is put down to the application of these priorities by the State Control Centre. This resulted in a lightning strike reported to DELWP by a fire tower on the Saturday 28/12/2019, being allowed to run unchecked for almost thirty-six hours before action was taken. This subsequently developed into the fire that burnt through Mallacoota. Calculate the cost of this lack of action!

**The safest and most effective way to reduce the opportunity for large fires to develop is to put out all fires when they are small as quickly as practicable under the FDI ratings. This must be the new mantra for DELWP's fire suppression priorities, consistent with sensible risk protocols.**

While the time taken to arrive at fires following detection can be minimised by strategic location of standby crews, a decline in the standard of road and fire trail maintenance means crews take longer to reach small fires. Investment in remote capability, including extra helicopter rappel teams, is a key element of future response strategies.

This must be accompanied by an overhaul of the roads and track on public land, especially in remote areas. The costs and losses incurred in fire seasons over the past few decades, and no doubt in the 2019-20 fire season, highlight this as a cost-effective investment.

It is noted that DELWP monitors a performance measure for fires contained at less than five hectares to suppress fires before they become established.

Most of the year putting out fires at less than 5 ha or 12.5 acres, which is not a minor fire, isn't difficult and does not stretch fire crews. If it is reasonable to assume that most fires occur at FDI's below 25, achieving 80% of fires suppressed at less than 5ha is not a great challenge in any 12- month period.

However, the real utility of this performance measure comes into play when fuels are dry and FDI's are rising. Once ignition occurs fire growth commences, and the rate of fire growth depends on variables like fuel dryness, fuel hazard, slope and wind speed.

Lightning strikes in remote locations offer a good example of high payback for achieving rapid suppression. Fire growth is initially slow (usually) but following weather typically exhibits rising FDI with potential for large fire growth (e.g., recent examples). Time for ground crews to access fires becomes a telling factor. Aircraft can reach the fire early in its development and initiate suppression, and can slow fire progression, but it must be remembered that forest fires can only be controlled by trained forest fire fighters who secure the fire with a mineral earth break and suppress all residual smouldering combustion that cannot be reached by aerial-delivered retardants.

With an increasing reliance on volunteers and on part-time and less experienced fire fighters, now is the time to commit to more trained, experienced fire fighters, who must be employed on a full- time basis. Forest Fire Victoria, a group of professionals with extensive practical experience, states that this is the only way to ensure the Department's prescribed burning program is effectively carried out and a permanent forest fire fighting skill base is maintained. The part time alternatives have been tried and they have demonstrably failed. A permanently employed forest fire service is as important to Victorians as metropolitan and rural fire services.

**On behalf of the Community, Forest Fire Victoria Inc. demands that when forest fuels are dry and the forest fire danger index is rising, small fires in conservation areas be allocated the highest strategic priority for immediate fire attack. In the words of a firefighter – *"You might not be successful, but you have to give it a red-hot go."***

**During periods of significant fire danger, priority must be given to rapid and aggressive first attack on all fires; particularly when forest fuels are dry and the FDI is rising. This must apply to all land tenures, including National Parks and Conservation Reserves.**

**Unless bushfire management is turned around, be prepared to see more of what we have seen this year on so many thousands of hectares of public land today – scorched, leafless trees on bare burnt ground with not a bird to be heard, or an animal in sight.**