

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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FOREST FIRE VICTORIA'S DEMANDS FOR EFFECTIVE FIRE MANAGEMENT

Chairman of Forest Fire Victoria, Barrie Dexter said "On behalf of the community who have suffered the ravages of bushfires and significant property losses, and the public lands that have been decimated by high intensity fire, we demand changes to Victorian fire management so this can never be repeated".

"Clearly the scale of the fires and the time taken to control them, initially under fairly benign conditions, are unacceptable", he said.

On behalf of the community who have grievously suffered from the ravages of bushfire, and in accord with proven science and hard-won experience, Forest Fire Victoria Inc. demands that the following changes to policy and practice on forested public land be implemented as an outcome of this Inquiry:

- That priority is given to rapid and aggressive first attack on all fires; particularly when forest fuels are dry and the forest fire danger index is rising. This must apply to all land tenures including National Parks and Conservation Reserves.
- That threat arising from bushfires is related to potential fire intensity (fuel load, terrain & weather) and the likely damage to the community; not to the risk or chance of a fire occurring. DELWP's concept of residual risk and claimed level of community safety is misleading.
- That DELWP 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. That DELWP fully meets its planned burning targets and makes progress against targets available for public scrutiny;
- That the 'lessons learned' from previous fires be applied to future bushfire suppression, to save history repeating itself yet again. Reviews of bushfires in 1972, 2003 and those since 2009, provide benchmarks which the IGEM must consider in his review of the 2019/20 fire season;

- That the government adequately fund agencies to enable them to effectively and efficiently meet their responsibilities to implement forest fire management on publicland;
- That the managers of public land be made accountable for managing both fire on public land, and the threat posed to neighbouring communities. Separating the management of the land and the management of fire on those lands is a recipe for further disasters;
- That local decision making is acknowledged as essential in fire attack. Centralisation of emergency management in the early stages of fires and emergencies has once again proven to be counterproductive;
- That the unsustainably high spending on bushfire suppression expenditure, significantly higher than in any other State or Territory, be brought under control; and to this end a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of Large Air Tankers be carried out before next fire season;
- That Insertions be made in the appropriate Acts of Parliament to increase implementation, reporting and transparency about fire prevention and suppression programs on publicland:
- That legislation does not place caveats other than consultation with other land managers, where the Secretary has clear responsibility for fire prevention and suppression;
- That the Secretary DELWP as the land manager, must have the responsibility to devise applicable work programs for fire prevention on public land and be responsible and accountable for their implementation;
- That the Office of IGEM should be independent of Emergency Management Victoria and located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet.
- That IGEM has a legislated responsibility to annually monitor work programs and report the outcome to the Crisis and Resilience Council on their efficacy.

In the context of *"history is instructive"*; our submission identifies hard won lessons, neglected or ignored, that must be reflected in contemporary policy, strategic direction and action on the fireground.

The Inspector General for Emergency Management's (IGEM) attention is drawn to his own and other recent reviews that serve as benchmarks for reviewing the 2019/20 fire season. Attention is drawn to Department of Energy Land Water and Planning's (DELWP) 2018/19 Annual Report to Parliament, which in our opinion obfuscates vital statistics necessary to evaluate the true state of forest fire management on public land. We also note the indifferent performance of 'independent' watchdogs, whose duty it is to safeguard the public interest.

The submission also draws attention to two critical issues implicit in all "*matters for consideration*"; firstly, legislation passed by Parliament; the law that sets down the duties, responsibilities and accountability of Secretary DELWP for forest fire management on public land and amendments that will improve accountability of responsible Ministers and Secretary DELWP.

The second is the unsustainable cost of forest fire management, exacerbated by huge expenditure incurred; poorly directed use of large fire bombers, futile attempts to quench high intensity bushfire in heavy fuel loads.

Forest Fire Victoria Inc. does not condone people being blamed for their actions in the field, often under difficult conditions, done in 'good faith'. Do not confuse blame with accountability which must be directed at portfolio ministers and senior bureaucrats.

Forest Fire Victoria Inc. concludes with the demand on behalf of the Victorian community and all those who have grievously suffered from the ravages of bushfire; in accordance with proven science and hard-won experience, that the IGEM undertakes his independent review without fear or favour.

THE COMPLETE FOREST FIRE VICTORIA SUBMISSION IS AVAILABLE IN THE "SOURCES" SECTION OF THIS WEBSITE.