

HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB



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Review of the performance targets for bushfire fuel management on public land

Our members do NOT support the continuation of the hectare-based target as the basis for the mitigation of bushfire risk. It has become all too apparent that the strategy has been enforced in a way that has produced two outcomes:

1. A devastating adverse impact on biodiversity in the woodlands, heathlands and dry country of Victoria where fire regimes are now imposed on a scale and frequency that ecologists know will ultimately cause the extinction of many species of fauna and flora.
2. The burning has not resulted in any real reduction in hazard to the places where the need for protection is the greatest

It has been apparent that DEPI (now DELWP) found the easiest way to meet the annual burn target of 5% of the Crown Lands in Victoria was to subject the drier woodlands and huge swathes of the 'deserts' in remote areas to massive 'landscape burns'. Those areas have few risks associated with fire escapes and fewer protesters to offer any resistance. Tougher target areas were ignored. Burning the dry country does little to reduce risks to Victorians in the fire-prone areas of the State. Indeed, we are not convinced that it has achieved any substantial reduction in hazards in the drier areas either, given that the population density is so low there and there are no tall forests to aggravate the danger.

Furthermore, the impact of increased fire frequency that has resulted from the imposition of the State burn target of 5% of Crown Land per year is not only felt in the dry regions. DELWP has ecological burn targets for various categories of landscape, depending on factors such as vegetation type, terrain and fauna known to be present. Those targets range from no prescribed burning to burning every 10 years – and major areas of heathland and woodland have an optimum of around 20-30 years. That cannot happen with the present burning regime; the department is ignoring the Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act (1988), Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy (1997) and Federal EPBC Act. An example of that is the continued burning of Red-tailed Black Cockatoo habitat that affects their food source.

The problem was that politicians acted hastily to accept the blanket 5% target suggested by the Royal Commissioners, without considering the adverse environmental impacts or evidence that the strategy would result in works being done in areas where fire was most dangerous. The politicians insisted that about 385,000 ha of crown land must be burned each year – and refused to act on the Royal Commission Implementation Monitors advice to reconsider the approach. There are even problems with the 5% figure. A sizable part of the total Crown land cannot be burned – ovals, golf courses, streamsidings, reservoirs, camp grounds, roads – so the percentage of the actual forests and woodlands that must be burned to achieve the target area of 385,000 ha is probably nearer 10%. That means an average burning interval of 10 years in the forests – not 20 years – is needed. That situation was acknowledged by a DEPI staff member at Horsham. That outcome is not environmentally sensible and will result in a further loss of biodiversity across the State, but particularly in the dry country.

Malleefowl, Black-eared Honeyeater, Striated Grasswren and Emu-wren are examples of fauna destined for extinction in the Mallee if nothing changes. Further, we believe that the burning regimes imposed over thousands of hectares in most blocks are not delivering an effective mosaic of large unburned 'islands' that are essential refuges for fauna. Burning such huge blocks (some 5,000 ha or more in size) has apparently come about as a result of pressure to try and achieve burn targets.

Small mammals and birds face the same problem – most cannot escape fire and, if any can, will face fierce competition in their new retreat. The burned area can only support small mammals and birds

when there is cover from predators and has the vegetative regrowth to provide food. Too frequent burning prevents that from occurring and, in the case of Malleefowl, prevents them from breeding because there is too little litter on the ground to rake into the mound to incubate eggs.

We know that 'desert' birds, reptiles and mammals need some areas to be unburned for more than 30 years in order to breed and survive. The current regime reduces that interval by more than half.

One member of DELWP who was appalled by the negative impacts of the fire practice in the SW of Victoria, remarked that some staff welcomed the burning because it allowed that arm of the department to expand and it offered more opportunities for work and advancement!

Proponents of extensive and frequent burning usually cite the Aboriginal burning to support their case. However, they ignore the fact that although Aborigines burned extensively, it was usually very selective and on a small scale. They devoted a lot of time to manage fire in the landscape, to suit their purposes (such as to attract game to small areas, to favour certain food crops, to clear pathways and to clear village areas). Large burns did not assist them to hunt game. Some areas were never burned.

In pre-European times there was connectivity across the country and flora and fauna recovery occurred rapidly from fire in any part of the landscape. Now we have little connectivity, with relatively small 'islands' of native vegetation in a vast sea of agricultural land.

Prescribed burns are needed to protect people, our assets and biodiversity BUT we believe that there are 3 principles that should be followed:

1. Large, long-unburned areas mostly contain the highest biodiversity – these should be protected by prescribed burns on the periphery and must not be a burn target every 10 years.
2. For the other forest areas we have to achieve a true mosaic of burned and large unburned areas in these 'islands' of native vegetation that now remain in the sea of agricultural land.
3. Fire frequency must not exceed that required for optimum retention of flora and fauna.

Any burning in these 'islands' (i.e. all of our forests, parks and reserves) must be done very astutely. The problem is not only how frequent the burning is but how it is done.

- If the prescribed burns and wildfires cover the entire area of forest or reserve (the 'island') in a space of 5 years then species will disappear.
- If the present convenient practice of 'back to back' burning in our reserves continues then whole swathes of the landscape will be rendered fauna-free because in five years there is a huge block of country that cannot support any small fauna. There is little 'mosaic' to this prescribed burn practice and therefore few refuges. It should be expressly prohibited.
- Currently there are no adequate measures taken to preserve large, hollow-bearing trees that are now being eliminated in prescribed burn operations. Large, old trees are vital for the survival of at least 70 species of birds and many reptiles and mammals. It takes 70-100 years for any significant hollows to develop in forest trees, so any loss of old trees is critical. The potential for loss is greatly amplified when fire frequency is increased, so that with the present short cycle of prescribed burning, in 50 years we may have no old hollow-bearing trees left in our woodlands and forests. Already there is a serious shortage in places such as the woodlands of the western Black Range State Park, where the usual practice has been to bulldoze or cut down any old tree that catches fire. That practice should be stopped – it is possible to quench such fires if suitable equipment is available. DELWP has not provided that machinery.

We conclude by stating that merely changing the '*performance target for bushfire management*' will NOT solve the whole problem – the way in which prescribed burning is done is also critical and if that is not addressed very little will change and our State will continue to degrade its wildlife heritage.

Yours faithfully

Dr PR Bird

Secretary,
Hamilton Field Naturalists Club