

## **Destruction of trees on fire control lines in Far SW Victoria**

Hamilton Field Naturalists Club

4 June 2015

Following the deaths of 2 people working on fire control in the Ash forests of NE Victoria in 2013, new guidelines were introduced by DELWP to remove hazardous trees from the forest work place.

We had observed in the Far SW Area a disastrous over-reaction and a failure to make a proportional response to possible problems – it appeared that a prescription for tall Ash forest had been applied to low, less dense Stringybark/Swamp Gum forest. That is, the Hazardous Tree Removal policy introduced in 2013 was generic and NOT adjusted for forest situations of varying type.

DELWP's Forest/Fire crew contractors destroyed significant habitat trees in Weecurra State Forest in south west Victoria (e.g. Morse Track) and in the Dartmoor area (e.g. Spencer Track and Dartmoor-Casterton Rd). Tim Burnard (SE Red-tailed Black-cockatoo Recovery Project) and HFNC have written to the Minister for Environment, Water and Climate Change to protest the loss of essential habitat and visual amenity resulting from a disproportionate response to possible hazards that might be facing workers on prescribed burns or wildfires in forests/woodlands in SW Victoria.

**Weecurra State Forest example** – in early 2015 DELWP had contracted an operator with large machinery to cut and push down mostly eucalyptus trees, with some wild pine here and there. The machinery worked within a corridor of up to 50 metres wide along access and fire tracks to destroy hundreds of trees including significant habitat trees ranging from 100 cm down to 20 cm in diameter. Of the short section of **Morses track** inspected, the estimated tree diameter and extent was as follows:

1/50 about 100cm	1/20 about 60cm,	1/7 about 20-30cm,
1/20 about 80cm,	1/10 about 40cm,	1/5 wild pine

**Dartmoor example** – 226 trees were removed from 1.75 km along the Casterton-Dartmoor Rd. The statistics for trees destroyed were as follows:

- 59 trees were live Stringybark >35 cm DBH
- 83 trees were live Stringybark 8-34 cm DBH
- Largest Stringybark was 110 cm DBH
- 46 trees were dead Stringybark 10-80 cm DBH (ave. 29 cm)
- At last 1 Stringybark had hollows suitable for RTBC
- 138 other native trees, 10-40 cm DBH

What impact does such management practice have on habitat (hollow bearing trees) or preferable food trees such as Brown Stringybark for the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo? There is supposed to be protection given to that habitat, under State and Federal legislation.

There did not appear to be a proportional response to a specific threat in this area to fire workers safety. Statewide there have been 23 actual injuries in 3 years (2009-12) but was there ANY evidence of past serious injuries to forest workers engaged in prescribed burns or wildfires in the SW area?

In the past, fire fighters attending fires in tall forests were always clearly reminded of the danger of falling trees and we assume this has not changed. So, what has changed?

- Was the increased area to be burned putting pressure on DELWP to speed up the process, regardless of environmental damage?
- Have many experienced fire fighters retired, leaving a deficit of knowledge on safety procedures? Has that led to carelessness when operating in forests?
- Was this simply another way of employing staff who once were engaged in forestry work?
- Has DELWP lost touch with its fundamental objective of caring for the environment?

Our response to the evidence of this over-reaction was to point out:

- The significant loss of scenic value – and impact on tourism. Who will want to drive along those treeless tracks in our National and State Parks or Conservation Reserves in the future?
- The enormous loss of habitat for endangered fauna that require large old trees with hollows or the older trees favoured by RTBC because they bear larger amounts of seed. Those trees are often found near the tracks, not having been cleared during past forestry operations.

HFNC's submission to the Minister was passed back to DELWP's Far SW Region for comment.

**Peter Scott (District Operations Manager)** wrote to HFNC, supplying some information, including the following:

- The Hazardous Tree marking Guidelines introduced in 2013 are now being reviewed
- A Feller Buncher is now used (when available) to minimise damage to other trees when tree falling or branch removal is required. The machine can reach 7 m from the road and 7 m up the tree to lop dangerous branches.
- Trees marked to be retained must be defensible from the control line. Initial treatment is to remove vegetation up to 3 m from the base of such trees.

**Michael Davies (District Fire Manager)** advised that he was holding a *Hazardous Tree Treatment Field Day* on 4 June 2015 at Heywood. HFNC responded, indicating that some members would be attending. In addition, we asked for information on how many injuries had been experienced in Far SW Victoria. We expressed our concern at what seemed to be a lack of sensitivity to habitat and visual values (noting the terrible impact on National and State Parks and Conservation reserves), and asked DELWYP to look at more environmentally sensitive ways to achieve the safety objectives.

#### **Meeting at Heywood on 4 June 2015**

Michael Harper (Regional Manager Far SW), Michael Davies and Peter Scott were present and presented the DELWP approach. Dave Munro, Rod Bird, Doug Phillips, Ruth Graney, Kay Alldridge and Bob McDonald were also present. This was an interesting and informative afternoon.

Printed information provided by DELWP:

- Far SW District Guide for Protecting Dot Trees – these are trees marked by a large yellow dot; they are trees requiring protection from fire due to their habitat values. These trees must meet the following conditions, or they will be removed:
  - Can be easily and safely protected or extinguished from the control line
  - Sufficient work is carried out to protect the trees from fire
  - The planned burn will be suitably resourced to protect them [*we do not accept that failure to ensure this should mean the tree will be cut down – the burn should NOT proceed if that cannot be ensured*]
- Hazardous tree – marking for Planned Burning – this glossy brochure was produced in 2015 and outlined what trees would now be removed (trees with a cross) and what would be retained (trees with a dot). Photos were given to indicate examples. These included:
  - Dry stags
  - Widow Makers
  - Hollow butt, 3-pronged footing
  - Dry side

Hazardous trees within 1 tree length of the control line are considered to have the following attributes:

- Present a hazard to crews before ignition
- May have an impact on fire fighter safety during ignition
- May become hazardous if affected by fire

Other information provided by the DELWP officers:

- The recent marking of trees (and some clearing) has greatly reduced the number of trees removed. We visited the Weecurra State Forest and observed recent work there – we noted a significantly better outcome than we observed in other areas of Weecurra (see photos).
- The burn plan for 2015 was 13,000 ha but only 4,000 ha has been burned to date.
- The State budget is around \$50 million for fire control.
- There were 5 'near misses' in Far SW (but no deaths/ bad injuries). DELWP had 683 vehicle incidents, 20 vehicle rollovers, 319 striking objects/animals, 29 with trailers in last 3 years.
- In future years vehicles may be provided that resist crushing by falling branches/trees.
- Feller-bunchers are the most effective machines for tree falling, able to operate in narrow confines (bulldozers are clumsy and require at least 4.3 m width and churn up the soil) and produce least damage to adjacent trees, but are expensive and few in number
- The planned burn at Weecurra will not proceed this year because of RTBC presence.

