



# HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

PO Box 591  
Hamilton, Vic 3300

19 Aug 2006

**Mr Don Tunney**  
**ParksVictoria**

**Dear Don**

**Re: Portland Fire Plan 2005-8 – Your planned ecological burn in NE sector (Murroa Corner to Menzel’s Pit ) of Mount Napier State Park**

In previous years the National Parks and former NRE authorities had recognized that the vegetation in this landscape should not be treated in the same manner as other forests. That experience seems to have been lost, judging by this latest recommendation.

Our knowledge of the fire history of this particular block is as follows:

- Jan. 1944 – this fire probably burned some of the forest
- Nov. 1965 – this fire was deliberately lit; it may have burned some of the forest block
- Easter 1972 – this fire was deliberately lit in the west and swept over Mt Napier itself and burned the forest block to the NW out to Murroa Corner
- Sept. 1977 – parts “cool burned” east of Menzel’s Track
- Dec. 1980 (New years eve) – fire deliberately lit at Murroa Corner and ran through to Menzels Pit – the damage was compounded when the fire authorities used this fire as an training exercise and proceeded to fall all the large, old trees that had caught alight, despite the fact that they were hundreds of metres from the farmland and all around was burned black. That damage to the habitat was worse than the fire, and it was longer-lasting.
- April 1993 – a “cool burn” on this block scorched trees to 10 m height and killed most of the young Manna Gum and almost all of the Blackwood except a few lining the Menzels Track. That fire created a ghastly landscape spectacle of dead trees, blackened trunks and dense bracken still visible today.

## **Ecological burns**

The basis for setting fire to the forest for ecological purposes is to restore or maintain biological diversity and health of the plant and animal communities. Fire is required in almost all communities at some stage but we believe that the application of a short-term burning regime in this forest type is absolutely incorrect and will do further damage to the Park. We urgently request that you do not go ahead with this planned burn. We are happy to meet with you on-site in order to show you the effects of “cool burning” in this forest, compared with unburned areas, and to further discuss the matter.

An “ecological burn” will achieve the following:

- It will kill almost all of the Blackwood – the trees are mostly 13 years old and have just reached a stage where they can exert some shading of bracken. You will note that there are NO mature Blackwood in this forest – they have all been burned before attaining that stage. The only near-exception is in the former Mt Napier Reserve where some trees are now 34 years old, that area having escaped from fire.
- It will kill most of the small Manna Gums (the sole eucalypt species in the park), although some will coppice again. Manna Gum are particularly susceptible to fire damage, unlike Messmate or Brown Stringybark.
- It will drastically deplete the number of old growth Manna Gum and the standing dead trees that are important as habitat for owls, parrots, Tuan and gliders. This part of the forest had been “reserved” by the former Forests Commission as a production forest reserve and given more protection than the other areas of the then vacant Crown land. It was the only area that retained large, old trees in any number and condition.
- The fire will stimulate bracken growth since the canopy will be opened up and the ash bed will favour the new ferns, creating a worse fire hazard within 2 years.

- A spring fire will disadvantage the dasyurid marsupials - This forest is particularly rich in Swainson's Antechinus and Brown Antechinus. These species are vulnerable to habitat loss during their breeding season and male die-off period. The Brushtail Phascogale and Sugar Glider have also been seen in this block (and only in this block) and their habitat needs to be protected.
- The scenic approach to the Mount will again be devastated by such a fire – the forest scape is only now, after 13 years beginning to recover from the last unfortunate burn.
- There have been no plant species nominated from the 178 native species that occur in the Mt Napier State Park that need to be advantaged by this frequent burning

What, therefore, is the specific objective in burning this forest again? What evidence is there for a need for frequent burning to promote particular species in this forest? And how can one rate the other adverse consequences as being of no importance? As indicated above, we know that the adverse consequence is to devastate the major species – Blackwood, Manna Gum, Cherry Ballart and Tree Everlasting.

### **Fire Hazards**

The Mount Napier forest has areas in it that to our knowledge have been unburned for 34 years (since 1972). The fire hazard in those areas is no greater – and mostly less – than in areas that were foolishly burned by the National Parks in 1994 and former DCE some years earlier. Where a dense stand of Blackwood grow, on the NE corner of the former Reserve, the bracken undergrowth has been greatly reduced and the fire hazard also greatly reduced.

This forest is of the type where Raisin (CSIRO) indicates that hazard-reduction using fire is not desirable. viz. *“The burning would promote an undesirable and more hazardous undergrowth ... Eucalypt seedlings with potentially dense bracken present – the eucalypts would be killed and the bracken would flourish and be able to carry severe fires every 3-4 years”*.

This scenario is exactly what happens – and has happened – at Mount Napier and Mt Eccles. We have followed the course of fire events at Mt Napier over the last 40 years and can attest to it. The amount of litter on the forest floor does not change markedly after about 4 years because the decay organisms are effectively at work there. There is a vigorous growth of bracken following a fire and particularly where the Manna Gums and Blackwood (the only tree species present in this forest, along with Cherry Ballart and Tree Everlasting shrubs in places) have all been killed, creating open sunlit space.

That bracken will never be reduced until there is a more complete cover of forest. The only other way to drastically (but temporally) reduce the amount of bracken is to burn the forest every 2-3 years in perpetuity – with disastrous consequences for the wildlife. That was the practice of various landholders and other arsonists in the years prior to 1985, when fires were regularly lit. It severely degraded the forest and produced the dense stand of bracken that is there today. It was not always so – historical evidence is that the brackens spread when the settlers ran their stock there and, no doubt, began the history of frequent burning (see Bird PR (1997) *‘Mammals and birds of the Mount Napier State Park’* in *The Victorian Naturalist* **114**: 52-65). This paper also contains details of vegetation and fire history.

Fires that are lit merely serve to incinerate the Blackwood and other trees that grow on the more fertile, deeper soils between the lava ridges – areas that also produce a very heavy growth of bracken. Against our advice and wishes a prescribed burn was put through the forest area east of Menzels Pit track in 1993. That fire incinerated the trees and all the shrubs. It was an ecological disaster fully equivalent to a wildfire. It is still recovering. Manna Gum and Blackwood cannot survive such fires – few Blackwoods survive there beyond one or two fire cycles. That forest contained Brush-tail Phascogale and other Dasyurid species that depend upon dense cover.

A better approach is to burn some defined breaks (preferably outside the Park), maintain better perimeter access (it is still quite poor) and internal tracks, and to keep fire out of most of the Park indefinitely. It is worth noting that few, if any, fires have ever started by lightning in this Park. We know of none that have escaped onto private land.

Yours faithfully  
PR Bird