



HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB



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To
Department of Sustainability and Environment
Attention: Fire Management Officer
Private Bag 260
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29 August 2008

Hamilton Field Naturalists Club submission to Fire Operations Plans for Wimmera Fire District, 2008/09 – 2010/11

HFNC does not dispute the need for appropriate prescribed burning to reduce fuel loads and so reduce the severity of summer wildfire. Prescribed burns must be done in a way that is sympathetic to the environment, achieving an adequate fuel reduction but also ensure the long-term survival of fauna and flora in the forest and strategically protect private assets outside the reserve. We note that the Fire Management Zones that we are commenting on are largely Zones 3 and 4 where the environmental assets are the prime consideration.

Our aim is to get a better outcome for endangered fauna. This can be achieved by genuine patch-burning on an appropriate scale, time interval, season and pattern. A true mosaic burn must leave large unburned sections within each EVC unit that exists in the planned burn area. Thus, a Potoroo, Brown Bandicoot or Heath Mouse that must have dense understorey to shelter in, cannot survive in an unburned dry, stony ridge where they cannot find food or shelter.

Members of HFNC inspected the so called ‘planned mosaic burn’ in the Serra Range (Griffin Track) part of the Grampians in May 2008 post treatment but were disappointed in the outcome. Firstly, large parts were burned with an intensity similar to that of a wildfire, with crowning and canopy scorch. Secondly, the prescribed burn abuts large areas to the north burned in the 2006 wild fires and a prescribed burn conducted in 2007 to the south leaving no effective unburned patches within the major Ecological Vegetation Class heathland unit, conditions which cannot ensure survival of vulnerable fauna species. This unfortunate situation would be compounded if the narrow adjacent unburned area west of Griffin Track is burned within 10 years. We made a brief inspection of that area and found clear evidence of small mammal (Bandicoot or Potoroo) occupation. This section should not be scheduled for burning within a period of at least 10 years. There is simply no suitable alternative habitat for Potoroo, Brown Bandicoot or Heath Mouse on the western side of the Serra Range. These species require a habitat of dense understorey that would be regarded as “high fuel load” but that is something that we have to live with if we are to ensure the survival of these species - which is the function of a National Park.

Members of the HFNC inspected the Griffin Track area with representatives of Parks Victoria (Graham Parkes, David Hanscombe) and DSE (Andrew Morrow, Mat Evans and Glenn Rudolph) on 8 August 2008, after a discussion at Dunkeld. We were able to address the issue of fauna in the context of fuel reduction burning. We believe that the following statements were accepted:

- That the fire operation would have resulted in a less intense fire on the slopes and peaks had the area there been lit by incendiaries from a helicopter. That had been the plan but the helicopter was apparently unexpectedly not available, and the burn went ahead regardless.

- That there were 2 large areas of similar and fairly uniform EVC, shown on the aerial photo exhibited by DSE, that were totally burned. These areas appeared to be each 300-400 ha and it was accepted by Graham Parkes that this was not a good outcome.
- That where the fire did not burn on the lower slope, those areas were dissimilar from the areas that did burn, containing extremely sparse ground cover. Our inspection showed that such unburned areas could not shelter Bandicoots, Potoroo or Heath Mouse and, therefore, in the absence of any suitable cover nearby, they would not survive in that area. The large areas unburned in the middle section (largely wetter gullies or higher slopes where fire did not reach) and southern section, near Cassidys Gap, were not of the same vegetation types.
- That it is vital that areas adjacent to such burns, particularly where they are of similar EVC, must not be burned until the vegetation in the burned section recovers sufficiently to provide cover and food resources for particular endangered species, species that may appear common now and species still unrecognized.

Unfortunately, the current proposed Fire Operation Plan does not appear to reflect any of the issues addressed by HFNC during that meeting and concerns raised by HFNC in several previous submissions commenting on the Wimmera FOP. The current fire regime within the Grampians NP will adversely impact on fauna and ultimately lead to local extinction of threatened species and further decline of biodiversity values within the Grampians Bioregion. Such an outcome clearly contradicts the Victorian Government's responsibility to protect threatened species under the FFG Act as well as the Federal EPBC Act.

HFNC suggest the following approaches to fire management would assist in reducing adverse impacts on fauna:

- Pre- and post-fire fauna assessments and integrated predator controls are required for each burn.
- The presence of vulnerable fauna species must be considered when formulating a fire plan.
- An effective mosaic (a "patch" burn) must be achieved in each EVC unit within the prescribed burn. We strongly oppose the current DSE plan to burn very large areas, where any "mosaic" is obtained by chance (if at all), and cannot ensure that unburned areas of an adequate size for fauna are retained in each EVC unit in the burn area.
- Prescribed burns must not abut large, recent wildfire burns or large, recent prescribed burns.
- Portable long-length sprinkler systems, as trialled at Wilson Promontory, would allow back-burning from a wetted line, enabling unburned sections to be left within the larger burn area. This allows the creation of a true mosaic with unburned areas large enough to sustain fauna.
- Burning later in the day or evening when conditions are milder in order to reduce fire intensity.
- More effective use of incendiaries dropped from a helicopter to reduce the overall intensity of a fire.
- Multiple burns/staged timing of burns, e.g. burn around edges at a time of low risk and burn the remainder later.
- Review the procedures used by the Fire Section of DSE when applying prescribed burning, in order to protect old hollow-bearing trees that are so important for wildlife. This would include protecting significant old trees by "candling" (burning loose bark on trunks) and removing debris from beneath hollow-bearing trees before fire is applied.
- DSE Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land (2006) needs to provide specific instructions for environmental management, including protection of habitat trees (the 2006 revision of the Code is sadly remiss in this regard, with general statements that are meaningless to the operator in the field – see Section 1.10.5 of the Code). What is required are direct statements about what fire crews should achieve or protect from fire – e.g. protecting hollow-bearing old trees.
- Back-burns after wildfires – any extensive back-burn should aim to leave patches unburned as fauna refuge (David Lindenmeyer, ABC Radio National, 14 June 2008). That is not aimed at by DSE.
- No camp fires in Reserves, Parks and Forests during the fire season – such a ban applies in most other States. A campfire at the Fulham Streamside Reserve on the Glenelg River escaped and swept through the Black Range State Park too, creating much damage in both reserves, particularly from bulldozers that were used to push over scores of large, hollow-bearing trees that are becoming a scarce natural habitat resource.

Specifics for the Wimmera FOP

06.G17 Glenisla Flats – Henty Ecological (sand heathlands), Zone 3- HFNC visited this area (~610 ha) following the Black Range prescribed burn in May 2008 and found that most of the Banksia had not produced seed and therefore the vegetation has not recovered from the previous fuel reduction burn and/or effects of drought. That circumstance may also affect the status of the fauna.

We dispute the classification of “Ecological” – it is Zone 3. We think that the last burn was more recent than 1993, possibly 1996 or 1997. Heathland of this type is at its best up to 20 years post-fire. This heath has had a history of more frequent burning than other areas of heathland, as a result of its proximity to the Billywing Pine Plantation. [The Pine Plantation itself is a fire and weed risk to the National Park and we look forward to the termination of this plantation]

We recommend that burning of the Glenisla Flats be deferred until the vegetation has recovered. We note also, that there are many slashed breaks or old tracks within the area and therefore it should be feasible to conduct burns of a much smaller size and achieve a true mosaic over time.

08.G19 Hut Creek Ecological (heathy dry forest) – 900 ha, Zone 4 – this is too large a block to burn in one go, unless there is a plan to isolate areas using alternatives as listed in suggestions above eg. portable sprinkler hose, this area should not be burned.

09.G06 Geerak Track (heathy dry forest) - 2,654 ha, Zone 3 – far too large to burn in one hit. This will be an intense fire, similar to the Griffin Track/Serra Range fire, and we anticipate similar adverse consequences (loss of refuge habitat for threatened species). The proposed fire takes scant account of issues of biological diversity (especially of fauna). The area planned for burning is on the western side of the Victoria Range ridge-line. This is the driest aspect, escalated by continues dry conditions, leading to slow recovery of the vegetation, and thus the restoration of habitat will be compromised. HFNC has been informed that the Smokey Mouse (*Pseudomys fumeus*) - also a rare species - could be in the planed Geerak Track prescribed burn area, and to-date no surveys had been done there. It will isolate the southern tip of the Victoria Range in an already fragmented landscape. HFNC is questioning the logic in burning such a large area likely to adversely impact on threatened fauna? This is Zone 3 and it requires ecological consideration.

08.G11 Burnt Hut Creek-Boundary Track Part 2 – 930+ ha, Zone 2 - this was treated in 2007 when a good mosaic was achieved. Why is this scheduled for “treatment” again, after only two years? This is completely unacceptable and would establish a bad precedent. Is DSE /PV now going to go back within a few years and burn everything that escaped in previous burns? The DSE Interactive Map has this as Zone 3, not Zone 2. The SW end has the vulnerable Valley Grassy Forest EVC, most of which was burned in the Mt Lubra fire of 2006.

11.G03 Golton South - 1,140 ha, Zone 3 (Heathy woodland EVC) – this area probably contains Squirrel Gliders, possibly the last refuge. This area of prescribed burn is too large and we doubt that an effective mosaic burn can be conducted. Extreme care would be needed to reduce the intensity of any fire, to prevent crown scorch and loss of habitat trees by fire.

09.G18 Black Range North – 390 ha Zone 3 (Heathy Woodland) - we note that the prescribed burn in the Black Range conducted in 2008 does not show on the map provided on the DSE website. With the Fulham fire and recent prescribed burning, more than 50% of the Black Range is less than 10 years from fire. Why then is this block being burned?

Southern Serra Range

If the Potoroo survives at all in the Grampians then it is likely to be in the southern Serra Range heathlands. No burns should be planned for this region for at least 10 years.

With kind regards

Reto Zollinger
President, Hamilton Field Naturalists Club

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