

HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB



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To:
Alison Stone
Executive Director, Land and Fire Management
Department of Sustainability and Environment

9 Feb 2009

Dear Alison

Re. Parliamentary Report on Fires 2003 and 2006

Thank you for your reply of 10 Oct 2008 to our letter to the Minister for Environment & Climate Change, the Hon. Gavin Jennings MLC. There are one or two points that we think needs further exposition.

We have a thorough understanding of fire ecology and the workings of DSE, our members having studied the matter for some 50 years and consulted with DSE over its Fire Operations Plans (FOPs) over many years. We know full well the impacts of wildfire on flora and fauna. We also fully understand and appreciate the need for prescribed burning for ecological reasons as well as security of human life and assets. A central issue in our submission was the future negative impact on fauna resulting from the massive increase in the scale of future prescribed burns and the way in which they are conducted.

Your response does not give us much hope that DSE (and the Fire Section in particular) appreciates the real concerns we have, or understands that its action in the next few years may, unless knowledgably and skilfully implemented, lead to mass extinction of some species of endangered fauna, contravening Victoria's Fauna & Flora Guarantee Act and the Federal EPBC Act.

- There is little recognition of the need for planned mosaics of unburned patches within the planned landscape burns. DSE staff hope that such a mosaic is achieved by chance. We have discussed that at length with DSE Fire Officers at Portland and Horsham, in regard to the Grampians, Cobobboonee and Lower Glenelg areas. Unless there are unburned patches representing each of the many EVCs in these huge burned areas then the long-term prospects for survival of some species of fauna are dim. Such species include Brown Bandicoot, Long-nosed Potoroo, Heath Mouse, Smokey Mouse and Spotted-tail Quoll. Unburned areas in some prescribed burns in Victoria are still being "patched out" – research in the Grampians by Parks Vic show that such areas are critical for survival of fauna.
- We see no evidence in our region of adequate (or any) consultation between Fire Section and Flora and Fauna Section of DSE when preparing FOPs and conducting the operations. The fire plans are very much the province of the Fire Section staff. Our concerns, raised at every FOP meeting for Portland and Wimmera region, are those that ought to have been raised by the ecologists within DSE. We see a gross deficiency in this area of DSE's work and have grave concerns for the future.

During the public consultation with DSE staff over Portland-Horsham Forest Management Plans we attempted to gain protection for old, hollow-bearing trees when prescribed burns were planned, or in the aftermath of wildfires such as the January 2005 fire in the Black Range when dozens of sparse old trees were bulldozed or cut down without any attempt to preserve this dwindling biodiversity resource. We did influence both Horsham and Portland Fire Operations managers to try and change their practice with regard to protecting such trees in prescribed burns, or to avoid knocking them down after wildfires, but we should not have needed to point out the obvious deficiencies in their routine operations (and it is no better in other regions of Victoria). Despite our submissions, there is nothing explicit in the revised Code of Practice, or in the Operations Manual, that stipulates the need to preserve such trees and therefore we can expect no general improvement in Victoria.

We hope that you are able to influence the operational fire plans of DSE and the conduct of the work.

Yours faithfully

Dr PR Bird
Secretary,
Hamilton Field Naturalists Club