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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL  
RESOURCES COMMITTEE

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE RESPONSE

### Inquiry into the impact of Public Land Management Practices on the Bushfires in Victoria

1. **The extent, timing, resourcing and effectiveness of the prescribed burning on both crown and freehold land;**

*This will always be a contentious issue in relation to the extent and timing of prescribed burning as burning is strictly weather reliant.*

*DSE work well in relation to all prescriptions as set out in the Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land. But the prioritising of resources is an issue in relation to all the competing issues. Things like the need to meet the yearly burn plan requirements, how soon resources are released to carry out the next planned burn while weather conditions allow burning. The adequate resourcing of post burn patrolling crews and aircraft need to be a major consideration.*

*The Moondarra fire early in 2006 highlighted the effectiveness of DSE's prescribed burning program; this was shown by how the forward rate of spread significantly slowed to the point of stopping once reaching the perimeter of a recent prescribed burn in that area.*

*The burning on freehold land in Latrobe City is at this stage is not part of the Municipal Fire Prevention Committees (MFPC) fuel management strategies that we recommend this is due to liability, resources, safety and trained personnel issues.*

*Latrobe City's MFPC has formed a subcommittee to manage the burning of council managed roadside reserves as these were highlighted as a major concern by behaving like a conduit for the fire to travel along during the Coopers Creek Fire.*

*Major firebreak works were carried out during the Great Southern Complex Fires and these need to be maintained and expanded on by designing a **major strategic fire break system** between the public and private interface where practicable.*

2. **The manner in which prescribed burning is conducted, including how applicable codes of practice are employed;**

I have worked with DSE staff to assist in their prescribed burning programs as well as liaising to have input into burn plans, and I am quite confident with the approach that DSE staff undertake in relation to consultation and collaboration with external stakeholders on how burns are to be

conducted.

Prescribed burning is carried out to precise burn prescriptions, which has become a science in its self.

DSE's Code of Practice for Fire on Public Land provides a valuable tool that is used to implement, conduct and complete burning operations.

Consideration needs to be given in further fostering working relationships with CFA Volunteers who are willing and able to assist in carrying out prescribed burning. In the Latrobe City and Baw Baw Shires public, private land interface I am aware that the facilitation of DSE (Noojee and Erica Districts) and CFA crews who work closely together to undertake prescribed burns. These local DSE Fire Management Officers and CFA Group Officers must be encouraged to maintain and foster these working relationships.

**3. The impact of prescribed burning and recent wildfires on Victoria's biodiversity, wildlife and other natural assets including water quality and quantity;**

Prescribed and regeneration burning from my experience shows that there is minimal impact on biodiversity, wildlife and natural assets. All of these factors are taken into account in the planning phase of the burning project.

The fires of 2006 have had a compounding affect on wildlife, natural assets and waterways in the northern areas of Latrobe City. Wild dogs have been pushed from public land deeper onto the private interface causing concern for local farmers. (I have first hand knowledge of this as information has been forthcoming of over 10 wild dogs being dispatched in this area recently) Wildlife numbers are noticeably less in the burn areas as the effects of the fire in relation to plant regeneration and animals either killed or driven out of there territorial areas of habitat.

Water quality in the Thompson River catchment area below the Thompson Dam has been greatly affected as a result of the Coopers Creek Fire with heavy rain causing silting up of the river and contaminating the water supply of the only private water board in Victoria at Cowwarr estate. (This resulted in Latrobe City sourcing a number of water tanks and transporting in freshwater supplies to these 20 properties).

**4. The reporting process applicable to prescribed burning programs;**

DSE/Parks Victoria fax information in relation to prescribed burns on a regular basis this further backed up by CFA passing on this information to Council as well.

No requirement under the CFA Act 1958 for the reporting of burning on private land outside of the fire danger period or in Latrobe City's Local Law. This is an area that needs to have standards developed

**5. The legislative and regulatory arrangements for prescribed burns**

**and bushfire management;**

This area needs to be tightened up in relation to prescribed burning on private land; a code of practice for burning on private land or standards for burning on private land may require investigation. Standards in relation to environmental requirements, fuel reduction/regeneration burning and training levels may need a uniform approach across the state. This is one area that the Municipal Fire Management process when implemented may need to further investigate.

**6. The effectiveness of maintaining permanent, strategically placed fire breaks and containment lines throughout public land areas;**

Experiences from the Great Alpine Complex fires has further reinforced the known fact that firebreaks do not stop fires, but do assist in reducing fire intensity allowing fire crews to manage fire in these fuel reduced zones.

So from my and Latrobe City's Municipal Fire Prevention Committees (MFPC) prospective maintaining permanent strategic firebreaks/containment lines on the public/private interface will assist in forming a valuable strategy to reduce the likelihood of wildfire spreading to or from public land.

These firebreaks/containment lines can also be used as a starting point to fuel reduction burning buffer zones, directional burning back into public land thus forming a deeper fuel reduced area. This combined with well managed fuel reduction practices on private land will complement these strategies.

The permanency of these control measures can be placed in future Fire Management Plans and mapping aids to assist fire agencies in preplanning and fire prevention strategies.

**7. The provision and maintenance of large water points on crown land to assist with bushfire aerial taskforce operations;**

With the current climate change impacting on water supplies in general, it has become more vital that the provision and maintenance of all crown land water supplies for the purpose of fire suppression be prioritised.

Not only for aerial operations but ground operations as well, as the majority of smaller water points have been neglected causing issues with access, signage, silting and becoming clogged with weed growth.

Having spent numerous tours of duty in a varied range of roles from Deputy Operations Officer to Fire Fighter as a CFA volunteer on the Great Southern Complex Fires, the access to water was a major concern. The majority of time water was supplied through the use of water carting tankers at a considerable cost to the state.

An audit of all crown land water points for the purpose of fire suppression should be mandatory.

**8. The impact of traditional land users such as timber harvesting, grazing, 4x4 driving, hunting, camping mining and prospecting on**

**the scale and intensity of the bushfires and the ability of relevant agencies to respond;**

Industry and recreational users alike will be impacted upon dependent to the different levels of past and planned usage in the areas affected.

What will be a flow on effect is the pressure placed on the unburnt areas of crown land as all users as identified compete for usage of available unburnt areas be it recreational or industrial.

**9. The provision of serviceable access tracks and signage to assist with recreational and emergency requirements;**

Adequate track signage is a must for track identification; this becomes critical for emergency service crews that have no local knowledge of the areas that they are working in.

The upkeep and maintenance of access tracks needs to be reviewed, especially **bridge maintenance works**. This was a major concern during the Moondarra fires of 2006 as a number of bridges in the area had 4-2 ton load limits, in one case stopping CFA tankers accessing a farm on the Tyers River, as the two access bridges both had load limits stopping tanker access. The only Fire Access track to this property was not maintained and impassable.

Due to years of inaction large sections of public land have had access roads neglected; funds need to be budgeted for to allow a rotational maintenance program to be implemented over and above the current levels.

**10. The impact of climate change on bushfires and public land management Practices;**

Climate change at this stage is having a major impact on fires in Victoria; the last five years scientists have been trying to raise the awareness levels of all sections of the community.

Already we can see that the frequency of large bushfire events is increasing with the time between these events decreasing.

Significant work was undertaken to protect the Thompson Dam catchment area. The scale of these works needs to be investigated to ascertain the effectiveness and viability for implementation to protect other catchments as water quality issues still exist in the lower Thompson, Avon, Tambo, Nicholson and Mitchell Rivers.

Significant weather events also require study in relation to land management practices such as logging and fuel reduction/regeneration burning. A number of local storm events caused flooding and water quality issues following the Great Southern Complex Fires; these impacted on the already burnt areas of Licola and Toongabbie/Cowwarr Districts.

**11. Whether additional measures are required to provide a mechanism for the skills, knowledge and interests of local communities, and appropriate scientific expertise to be better represented in the management of bushfire risk on public lan**

Nil comment

**12. The involvement of local communities in the management of fire;**

Community consultation is a vital part of planning, prevention, response and recovery and has greatly improved in recent times. These are areas that require promoting and fostering as communities will more and more identify with a sense of ownership and work closer with government bodies to facilitate safer fire management strategies.

**13. Any other matter that impacts on the scale and intensity of bushfires in Victoria.**

With severe weather events impacting on our environment as a whole, serious thought needs to be given to initial regional quick response attack aircraft and first response crews.

Aircraft are a major resource in combating fire in the initial stages and should be utilised at the very first instance. Ground support will required to assist and mop up. Aircraft should be strategically placed regionally across the state to allow timely and quick response to initial fire sightings.

With Gippsland being a vital link to Victoria's Critical Infrastructure supplies of power and gas it is imperative that we minimise the risk to all sections of the community, by minimising the likelihood of fire escalating into large dangerous wildfires, small fast mobile attack aircraft will assist in minimising the spread of the initial fires to allow ground crews to assist.

This is an area not well initiated in the past our standard operating procedures need to change to reflect a more urgent need to minimise the spread and threat of fire to the environment, industry and wider community.

The need to contain and minimise the potential spread of fire on public land must be a priority, the implementation of quick response air attack units coupled with a maintained strategic fire break system will assist fire authorities in the containment and suppression of fire.

Signed



**Lance King**  
Municipal Emergency Co-ordinator  
Latrobe City Council

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[lanceki@latrobe.vic.gov.au](mailto:lanceki@latrobe.vic.gov.au)

Direct: (03) 5128 5606

Mobile: 0407 842 807

Fax: (03) 5128 5672

Phone: 1300 367 700

PO Box 264, Morwell 3840

141 Commercial Rd, Morwell 3840