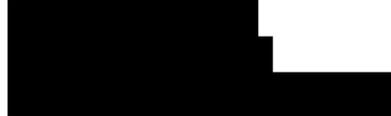


Submission for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Date 18/08/2020

This Submission is from, Brian Donchi



Ecosystems Decline- Parliament of Victoria.

To Michael Baker

Brief

I have worked in the Victorian forestry sector for the past forty years with the majority of my employment working within all of the forest FMA areas like, East Gippsland, Tambo, North East, and Central Gippsland, in which I still have a strong interest in Forest Management.

Its a well known fact our forests have been suffering a huge decline in Ecosystem loss because of all the huge bush fires over many years with millions of hectares of pristine forest including National Parks and Water Catchments being severely impacted by fire each year.

The Government needs to acknowledge all the damage being caused by bush fires, which is evident over all forest land tenure which has been taking place for many decades. East Gippsland at the moment is a prime example of Ecosystem loss with vast areas of burnt forests with creeks and rivers choked with silt and ash as a direct result of all the forest fires across the landscape this season.

Ecosystem decline has nothing to do with timber harvesting in a small percentage of Victoria's forests which are being harvested on a rotation of an eighty year cycle, there needs to be acknowledgment that 94% of all State Forest land is excluded from any form of timber harvesting or machinery where there is also lots of Ecosystem decline.

There is a lot of resentment from industry and residents of East Gippsland as to why there wasn't a lot more fire prevention work undertaken before this summers fire season by DELWP to help mitigate against the severity of the impending fires season to protect these important forests and ecosystems.

The unprecedented scale of damage this disaster has done to the entire region is beyond belief which will take decades to return to partial normality, it will never be the same beautiful forest or Ecosystem in our lifetime, it will take many century's to recover if at all because of climate change.

Its something that we must voice our dissatisfaction about to the Government for all its failings to adequately do more to protect our forests given the Government's own Department DELWP failed to spend there allocated budget on forest fuel management to protect all forest biodiversity values.

In the State Of Victoria, its my understanding Legislation Planning Management and suppression of forest fire is the responsibility of the State Government through its Departments and agencies including country fire authority (CFA) and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) with other organisations called in as required like SES, VicForests, Army etc

The Government and responsible Departments managing the States land tenure must seriously think about new changes to there forest landscape management and practices and policies in the wake of this seasons bushfire disaster given there was a huge budget to undertake all the prescribed burn works to meet required minimum targets which didn't eventuate.

There are startling revelations that in Victoria- for example- the State Government allocated \$121.6 million for forest fuel management in 2018-19 season. But only \$18.5 was spent on direct fuel management, so where was the remaining \$103.1 million dollars spent, sadly not on fuel hazard reduction to protect forest ecosystems and communities a huge mistake.

The question needs to be asked, why the Department failed to meet the approved burn targets given the huge fuel loads building up under drought conditions for the past three years. Surely this is a huge failure by the Department to not undertake a lot more mitigation work given the there was a huge budget allocated for the fire management works to be undertaken.

It was confirmed by Government that about \$400 million had been spent on direct firefighting during the bushfire crisis with a further \$200 million already put into fire recovery and still climbing and will climb for years to come not to mention other important losses that don't have a dollar value attached like the loss of Ecosystems.

Last year almost 250,000ha was approved for planned burning but only 130,000ha was actually burnt remember its all about asset protection now with the main focus of all future fire fighting now focusing on asset protection, which has allowed all the understory to build up to dangerous levels.

Surely the Department didn't think this season was going to be a normal season after three dry winters and lots of fuel in the forest building up to unacceptable levels. Its been estimated there has been over a billion animals killed in these bushfires which has burnt over six hundred thousand hectares of forest which is devastating to say the least.

The Australian conducted a news poll after the fires which showed the Aussies point to inadequate hazard reduction in our forests as the main reason for the severity of the recent bushfires.

While the Conservationists were in the Governments ear getting more and more forest locked up into new National Parks and wildlife reserves to protect these trees and animals, they forgot to ensure forest fuel loads were being managed appropriately. To ensure biodiversity was being maintained in accordance under there management.

In the wake of the devastating 2009 bushfires the Commission recommended 5 percent of public land 390,000ha be burned each year to reduce the fire risk across the broader landscape to help protect the wider forest areas of all land tenure.

The Labor Government abandoned there responsibility by stepping away from the planned burn targets after the 2015 planned burn got out of control and burned homes near Lance field which made the Department and Government look bad because of lack of resources and planning.

I just wonder what assets they were thinking of protecting across the forest landscape because a majority of historic assets have been lost, damaged and destroyed in these devastating fires which can never be replaced. Not to mention all the homes and out buildings in so many different locations.

This fire season was a disaster waiting to happen, everyone knew it was going to be bad, but the intensity of the fire is what has done all the damage its never been so damaging in previous years, which is why forest management practices need to change.

There will need to be some serious discussions around how improvements in forest management can help protect all forest values including trees, animals, parks, and water catchments and ecosystems by this I mean a lot more appropriate fire mitigation work to be undertaken across the entire forest landscape including all national parks, water catchments, under new methods of using more machinery to strengthen fire resilience in forests.

With the bushfire costs in the hundreds of millions of dollars and still climbing is a national disaster at the highest level which will impact regional communities for decades.

Key points to consider.

- There needs to be well maintained firebreaks between all private property and State Forest.
- There needs to be a minimum burn target set across all land tenure including National Parks in Victoria as a minimum to help protect all forest values.
- Forest Thinning's needs to be seriously considered as a another method of fire prevention work which is taking place across most overseas countries.
- A lot more bush roads require firebreaks to be constructed to help fuel reduction burning and help control bush fire.
- The CFA could help in undertaking burning programs with DELWP as training exercises.
- If budgets are allocated towards fire prevention work, ensure it is carried out.
- A lot more strategic fire prevention work needs undertaking around fire prone communities
- Appropriate size machinery must be used, small machinery is false economy.
- Ensure appropriate information is being communicated out to the public.
- Appropriate Fire mitigation works will become critical under climate change conditions
- Senior management within these land management Departments must be held accountable for there failings in not undertaking vital works.

Note

- This Inquiry should not consider logging as the cause of Ecosystem decline in Victoria as it has nothing to do with deforestation of public land, all harvested areas are replanted back to their original tree species in a small percentage of forest.
- The Inquiry must consider all land tenure to be included in the Inquiry.
- Our forests will require a lot more work as well as changed forest management practices to reduce the impacts of fire under hotter and dryer conditions from climate change to protect Ecosystems decline.
- The invasion of weeds like blackberry, in fragile forest Ecosystems along streams and rivers is a serious concern that needs to be addressed also if the government is serious about protecting fragile areas of vegetation.
- Feral animals are also a huge problem that needs to be addressed and better, managed considering the government was wanting to cull over 400 Brumbies because they were pugging up the streams in the High Country.
- Deer in high numbers in some locations are also impacting some fragile plants and Vegetation which is also impacting creeks, and streams as they wollow in the mud.
- Feral pigs are also moving into some areas creating lots of damage to soil and plants.
- Feral cats are also killing a lot of native animals which must also be addressed.

Its a Combination of a lot of different things that will require changing to help protect our States Ecosystems which are all managed by various Government Departments.

Locking up forests and keeping industry and all recreational users out will not help to protect ecosystems, or save flora or fauna,

The decline is far greater than the little piece of forest the Victorian Timber Industry operates in, have a look across all land tenure.

And finally all the money in the world will not help protect Ecosystem decline if the Government agency's doesn't acknowledge its own failings of doing a lot more work in the forest to help reduce the bushfire intensity.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss with the panel.

Best Regards

Brian Donchi

