

East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce

27 January 2017

David Davis MLC
Chairman
Inquiry into Bushfire Preparedness

Re : The inquiry

Background

1. The title of the Parliamentary committee – “Inquiry into fire season preparedness” is ambiguous. Does it mean “are we prepared to fight fires that occur” or does it mean “have we done preparation to reduce fire or their impacts”? The terms of reference indicate that both of the above apply but that there is a strong emphasis on reducing risk by Preventative Burning” as part of preparedness (as per the first 5 items in the terms of reference)
2. The term “preventative burning” is new and misleading. The normal terminology for reducing fuel in the forest has been fuel reduction burning, prescribed burning or planned burning. The term “preventative” infers that if burning is done it will prevent fire. This is not necessarily the case but it will certainly reduce the intensity of any fire.
3. The key is in the science and the basic formula

$I = Hwr$ where :

- I = Fire Intensity
- H= Heat of combustion of the fuel
- w = weight of fuel
- r = rate of spread of fire

The more fuel, the more intense the fire

4. The reality is that fire experts agree that fuel loads in most of our forests are at levels never seen before and that the high fuel loads (perhaps combined with some climate change issues) are resulting in the mega fires of the last two decades. It can only get worse unless we take drastic action to reduce fuel loads

What actions can we take ?

The question is - given the state of the forest at present and the long period of neglect , how can we restore the balance of nature. Some thoughts :


1. Accept the aboriginal burning techniques of burning in patches as the model. Note that in many ways the aboriginals were simply mimicking the natural patchwork of burns which nature provided as a result of multiple lightning strikes
2. Accept the statement made by aboriginal fire expert Victor Steffensen that “*the canopy is sacred and must be protected at all costs. It provides boundless habitat, flowers, fruit and seeds and shelter for everything alive below*” This statement is well supported by apiarists and should be the basis of the model for “cool burns”. There is general acknowledgement

that many of the burns undertaken by DELWP in recent years have been too hot and that the DELWP policies of burning out blocks in one day etc have contributed to this less than acceptable outcome

3. Accept the fact that the new government policy on fuel reduction burning is that of a "risk based" approach which is aimed at reducing the impacts on life and property when a fire occurs from deep in the forest and threatens assets. However the policy does not address the impacts on the ecology, water and soil values of mega fires which develop from deep in the bush nor the long spotting potential of those fires
4. Accept that, because we have a long history of neglect of burning of any significant area, there are huge areas of forest with high fuel loads and that these areas have to be treated as a priority to save the forest from the next mega fire
5. Accept that because of the need to "catch up" due to the above neglect, the patches to be burnt will need to be quite large
6. Focus burning on ridge tops - which is where most lightning fires start. Large lengths of ridgetop can be burnt late in the season and in many cases through the autumn and winter at relatively low cost to give some "quick wins"
7. Burn when the bush is in a condition where "cool burns" can be achieved ie burns which do not impact on the crowns of the trees
8. Change the burning culture from burning large blocks when administrative processes are "right" (and regardless of the burn intensity etc) to burning when the bush is "right to burn without damaging the canopy"
9. Burn regularly to achieve a mosaic of ages of burns
10. Give individual DELWP officers responsibility for a patch of bush and then delegate more authority for them to burn when conditions are right. Those officers would need to be remunerated commensurate with their level of knowledge and experience. They would preferably be locals with good knowledge of the bush and the ability to spend time getting to know fuel conditions etc in their patch so as to maximise the windows of opportunity to burn
11. Change the culture from the current risk adverse culture within DELWP which is not conducive to encouraging staff to achieve outcomes
12. Given the condition of the bush and the unpredictability of weather there will inevitably be some mistakes made. Ensure that staff are indemnified and use mistakes as learning exercises not the opportunity to assign blame

The other conclusion which we suggest is that field inspections of the state of the bush are an important part of the process to establish the level of preparedness and it is difficult to get good decisions out of inquiries based on paperwork and public hearings

Sincerely


John Mulligan
Chairman
East Gippsland Wildfire Taskforce

Copies to : All members of the Taskforce

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