

## Inquiry into Fire Season Preparedness

Submission by Firefighters4Forests

The 2015 - 2016 fire season for the Strathbogie and adjoining CFA Brigades has shown that with community consultation, prescribed burns don't have to end up like the Lancefield debacle of 2015 which firefighters from our local brigades attended.

For quite some time it was obvious that the Forests in our immediate area were destined for a "prescribed burn" and that we as active CFA members would be expected to be available should such a fire get away from the DELWP teams.

Many of our Firefighters have undertaken Leadership training within the CFA and a major part of that training was in assessing fires potential in a given area, in a given time and with various fuel and weather conditions.

The tools supplied to assess potential situations are rudimentary but prepared and issued by the CFA, CSIRO and DEPI / DELWP.

Understandably these kits are quite antiquated by current computer modelling standards but they have been issued to give the people on the ground some assistance in assessing a fires potential. To this end, and tapping into many years of practical fire fighting experience, it became very obvious (and very quickly), that the potential for a major burn out was in the offing somewhere in our vicinity as a number of sites had been nominated for prescribed burning during the Autumn period.

We had been advised that DELWP planned to burn 3,000 hectares of the Strathbogie Forest in the Autumn and given the drying conditions we advised that such an activity might be viewed as being foolhardy, dangerous and potentially fatal for the communities bordering the forest.

The depth of forest litter and drying vegetation was obvious and all our experienced fire crews were not looking forward to being called out to fight this one!

The communities on the East and Southern Flanks of the forest were in the most potentially threatened position and farms of our own Strathbogie Plateau were in potential danger areas given the possible wind conditions.

Put simply it was too hot, too dry, too big and too dangerous!

The idea of experienced Firefighters calling on government departments to take three deep breaths and cool off was a new issue and one that long term CFA members did not treat lightly. What we were doing was standing up for small rural communities safety. To a slightly lesser degree we were trying to reduce the wholesale destruction of the Native forests, and also the forced relocation of wildlife onto adjoining farming areas and roadways.

From our side there were calls to restrict the fires to smaller, mosaic style of burns and eventually after much discussion this was agreed too. Soon after this we received some long sought after beneficial rains which put the whole operation on hold which rather proved the point. At the time we were instructed not too include the CFA logo, PPE or vehicles in our publicity which we were quite happy to accede too. So using the new title of Firefighters 4 Forests we gained some timely media coverage. (Photo from Weekly Times showing forest issue as most viewed topic). The media coverage and interest took us by surprise. Not only did we receive a balanced article from the Rural communities most regarded newspaper, we also fielded calls from ABC Radio, both State and National networks, our local print media as well as regional community Radio.

What that said to our people was that what we were doing was worthwhile and that a lot of people in other areas were taking in and watching our actions. (Since that time I have have not received one adverse reaction to our stand). Once the excitement had blown over we were approached to put together a roadshow to take to other areas within the State to assist them with the same issues. This is something we don't really want to instigate and we would hope the findings by this Committee will negate the need to undertake this role.

Where too from here? It is vital that in any future control burn situations that community and volunteer groups have a say in the matter. My personal concern from this last Autumn's "no burn at all" outcome, was that we would be seen as the obstructionists should a fire break out naturally and that we had impeded the Department's fire reduction plan. On speaking with adjoining community members, they had been just as concerned as we were that the control burn might get away but they didn't think that there was anything they could do about it! So we must have involvement and genuine voice from the communities living adjacent or near to forests. By opening up the consultative process it can be seen that the Department is at last becoming serious about whole of community consultation and engagement.

One of the major issues to come out of this has been the publicising that prescribed burns offer little assistance in major or extreme conditions and that the money spent on prescribed burns could be better spent providing more efficient fire fighting appliances or methods.

Observation on ground shows that after any burns the lower storey plants regenerate faster and thicker than if left alone. This put simply, exacerbates the problem further into the future. Also, the question has been asked many times from CFA members as to why Perimeter and Ridge Line fire breaks have not been used more widely?

Another issue of concern is that prescribed burns feed the fear of people living near forests and creates the false hope that a big burn will ensure safety for all which is sadly unfounded. Some years ago, fuel reduction burns were carried out in the Spring Time and were known colloquially as cool burns. This style of burning allowed wildlife to vacate the area relatively safely and also encouraged regeneration at a slower speed. With the shift to Autumn burns we have seen high fuel loads, dry forests and major loss of wildlife. In many instances the seasonal Autumn break rains have fallen soon after these prescribed burns creating polluted creeks and rivers as there is not the ground cover to hold back eroding soils.

To say that we are pleased to become involved in future fire planning is a two edged sword, we are damned if we do or damned if we don't, but at least it will offer our Rural communities the opportunity to at last have some real input into the future of the Victorian States few remaining Native Forest areas and the care and safety of the communities around them.

Presented by:  
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