

Submission to the Inspector General for Emergency Management Inquiry 2019/2020 Victorian Fire Season.

My name is Maurice Killeen, lived all my 76 years near the foothills in Gippsland north of Maffra.

Operated our family timber processing operation and now retired.

CFA volunteer 60 years this year, brigade captain, deputy group officer, CFA delegate for Municipal Fire Prevention, OHS, Central council VFBV, State Advisory CFA Equipment Committee, Municipal roadside advisory Committee, spent time over 4 years with remote indigenous communities in FNQ above Cooktown mentoring remote indigenous home building, sustainable timber industry and discussing fire stick hazard reduction.

Up until the late 1970s it was the responsibility of our selective logging operation to cool burn the areas we had harvested and under the guidance of my father I became skilled at carrying out many mosaic cool burns.

#### PREPAREDNESS TO THE 2019/2020 SEASON.

Victoria has not been well prepared for fire seasons going back 30 years.

Since the 1980s Victoria has failed to keep up with adequate hazard reduction burns resulting in hotter and frequent bushfires 1998, 2003, 2006/7, 2009, 2013, 2019 March and Dec19/2020.

Victorian government changed to larger hazard reduction burns of 300 plus hectares, but they were too hot.

We need to revert to small cool hazard reduction burns.

With the 2019/2020 bushfire the expanse of high fuel loads, the drought, and low humidity came together resulting to damage to our forests, this cannot continue.

#### COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS.

The mention of "doubts over current prescribed burns policy" is worthy of further comment.

1. First we have to stop burning large areas, and classing them as eco and fuel reduction burns which they are not.
2. Large hot fires whether they are wildfires or "managed" fuel reduction fires promote accelerated growth for more frequent fires.
3. Our forests have been changed by management policy of 30 plus years of fire treatment with an occurrence of mainly extreme and wild bushfire as well as large hot prescribed burns.
4. There has been a small number of moderate wildfire and cool prescribed burns and large areas of forest with no fire treatment for many years.
5. If a hazard reduction burn scorches or browns the tree tops it has failed.
6. Waiting for the right conditions to completely burn a large hazard reduction area (300 plus hectares) has greatly reduced the window of opportunity to burn, and when actioned some slopes have burnt well and others have been burnt far too hot.
7. Many of the hot fires have developed into crown fires letting the direct sunlight in to strike the seeds and a new forest of eucalypts would shoot up and grow, then the canopy would finally restore and grow over blocking the direct sunlight leaving this mass of new forest with nowhere to go. The new forest becomes stunted and bushy forming a third layer of high loads of leaf and twig fuel. The forest then has high concentration of dry leaf fuel on the forest floor from the previous burnt crown and now the middle layer has up to four times the fuel load of the original forest. This third layer makes a violent stepping stone to activate a crown fire from even a docile fire on a mild day, resulting in most bushfires and prescribed burns in the last thirty years ending up as part or all crown fires.

## 2.

### INDIGENOUS BURNING.

The indigenous managed forest of days gone by had a closed canopy and low vegetation bushes of one metre or less on the forest floor forming two levels of fuel, not three levels.

Diaries of the early European explorers all speak of a clean forest floor and “parklike” when they travelled through the forests, and commenting the indigenous didn’t burn the rivers and swamps. There is merit adopting indigenous burning in parts of southern Australia, but many areas have been changed over the years and will need a different approach to reintroduce an indigenous burning regime.

Indigenous burning practices has many variations throughout Australia but the principals are similar of small low height cool burns.

Some parts of south eastern Australia wasn’t burnt by the indigenous people compared to the northern parts of Australia.

Since the changes with European settlement most of the southern areas now need hazard reduction. It would be good to have indigenous personnel involved with hazard reduction if it was possible. It needs to show results, not become an expensive patronising exercise and insult to the skills of indigenous people.

### HOW TO CHANGE THE CYCLE ?

Victoria has to break the cycle of large areas being treated with hot burns by bushfires and hazard reduction, and replace with small cool hazard reduction burns, resulting in low intensity bushfires. There is need to maintain more one vehicle width tracks or walking tracks through the bush so many small patches can be cool burnt out within a day, this way a fuel reduction burn is not given a chance to build up to a hot fire.

Small cool burns produce very little smoke.

The prescription for these small burns would need to be revised to have clearance to be lit whenever the day and hour suits.

After a concerted effort for say 10 years, a mosaic or of lots of cool burned small patches are created all at different times, enhancing biodiversity in flora and fauna.

With small area burns (less than 50 hectares) the fauna can escape to a previous burnt area.

This breaks the continuation and makeup of forest fuel to slow a bushfire and some of those lightning strikes could be left to burn out.

Converting to small burns opens up the window of opportunity to burn nearly all year round.

Small burns are easier to manage, and extinguish if the need arose, and are low risk.

Also the thrill of a statement by arsonists would be less attractive.

In some areas after a few cool burns are carried out, it should get to the stage the vegetation will slow its growth considerably and very little or any burning would not be needed for a long time.

Regards the alpine forests there was a view that the indigenous managers didn’t burn them, but burnt the lower forest that was a buffer to protect the alpine forest.

### WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE.

1. Decentralise the control of management back to local control.
2. Include CFA brigades with planning and fire management especially on the interface between DELWP and private properties, where feasible allocate some areas to CFA brigade Groups to manage, and complementing brigade training.

3.

3. Create maps sectioning the small burn areas establishing strategic perimeter tracks to burn from, many of these need only be walking tracks and cleaned up before a burn with a leaf blower.

As example a 200 hectare area can be designated to be hazard reduced.

On a suitable day there may be six areas 5 to 20 hectares in size sectioned by tracks and trails and ready to cool burn, at the end of the day there could be total patches adding up to 70 hectares burnt of the 200 hectares.

A week or so later do another lot of patches and so on.

4. Eliminate the culture of blaming and hanging out to dry a DELWP, FFMV or CFA manager /officer if a burn they controlled didn't go as planned.

Government needs to give more support to the skills of fire managers than they have done in the past.

5. Victoria's roads and highways are death traps and linear fuses and need hazard reduction of dry grass and scrub by cool burning.

Some of these roads have rare or threatened species that need periodic cool burns, local fire brigade records would show when the roadside was last burnt, the past burning is the reason the species is there.

Roads need to be maintained to stay open where possible during bushfires.

#### OTHER COMMENTS.

1. Discussion of climate change needs to be separate to the discussions of bushfires.

2. Over the years there have been enquiries after bushfires many of us have put in submissions and the same issues come up but are not addressed by government.

3. It is very demoralising each time to see our forests impacted by hot fires and damaged, the loss of life, and the impact on the environment when many of us know how to stop this devastation and willing to participate, but seems all persuasions of politics cannot make it happen.

4. Victorian government must cease the policy of wait until the bushfire starts then then evacuate communities and use aircraft, this is not the answer.

Aircraft are limited with ability to fly because of wind and lack of visibility from smoke, their use is an expensive reaction to the build up of fuel loads from lack of cool burns over the years.

Prevention by hazard reduction must be at the forefront of Government policy again.

Road, Sea, Rail, Health and workplace authorities to name a few, have prevention of fatalities high on their agenda, but not fire authorities.

Forcing residents to evacuate their homes and life possessions each time there is a bushfire is not prevention from threat of fire.

Maurice Killeen. 

14<sup>th</sup> April. 2020.