

Jim Walker sub to IGEM Inquiry, 30 April 2020

To: igem@igem.vic.gov.au

I am responding to six issues (in bold) extracted directly from the IGEM inquiry Terms of Reference.

I have attached some images abstracted from the Guardian newspaper which illustrate the inability of fire agencies to eradicate fire when it was potentially containable, indicating the need for better and more fire-fighting equipment and more staff, and perhaps better tactics.

Effectiveness of Victoria's operational response to the 2019-20 fire season.

Notification of the fire situation has improved, but in many remote places, where mobile communication was non-existent or had dropped out, no communication was possible during the recent fires.

Providing UHF radios, or allowing local residents to use them so they can communicate with fire and emergency units could be useful.

More and better fire suppression equipment based locally would be useful.

Training communities in the use of fire suppression equipment would augment use of the equipment.

Having a good local water supply is essential

Official post-fire analysis and maps with description of tactics and use of equipment, and the effectiveness of these would be useful to the public if made available

State evacuation planning and preparedness processes/practices and their effectiveness with an emphasis on remote/isolated communities and Victorian peak holiday season locations.

Victoria's remote communities generally evolved without due planning consideration given to risk of wildfire.

All communities should be educated in fire risk and fire preparedness from primary school on, including practical experience. This would allow them to understand the issues and take control.

Stay and defend should be the aim, with a retreat plan as backup.

Evacuations should start early by giving ample warning, and requiring frail, sick and perhaps young children to leave, and go to a safe destination.

Review of all opportunities and approaches to bushfire preparedness, including different methods of fuel and land management (for example 'cool burning', mechanical slashing, integrated forest management, traditional fire approaches) to protect life and property as well as ecological and cultural values

The current approach to bushfire preparedness is not working well, as indicated by the loss of lives and property, and adverse impacts on indigenous flora and fauna.

Environmental management should be funded on the same scale as public health, as healthy environment is directly linked to human health, and economic viability. The environment is not incidental to life it is essential to life, and the human economy.

Mown or grazed lands around towns including treed areas could be a useful risk reduction measure.

Remove logging from public forests, as logging increases fire risk substantially.

Fighting fires more at night, when generally the air is cooler, could have advantages.

Cool burns (groundlayer and some understory only) should be conducted where necessary to protect indigenous flora and fauna.

impact of increasingly longer fire seasons on the ability to prepare, deploy and sustain efforts directed towards emergency events in Victoria

The consensus is that no amount of planned burning will stop wildfire on extreme fire danger days. Given that, only cool burning (ground layer and perhaps shrubs) should be practiced.

One size does not fit all, so large scale planned burns should be avoided, and the areas burnt tailored to weather conditions, vegetation types and terrain.

Wildfire on extreme fire danger days can be impossible to control.

Extreme fire danger days are predicted to increase and the fire season to extend as global temperatures continue to rise.

For the above reasons all planning must take into consideration the worst possible outcomes

planning and response mechanisms to protect biodiversity threatened by bushfire

Fires increased dramatically in Victoria after the arrival of Europeans, who had burnt landscapes in Britain and Scotland for example to increase grazing for sheep, or to provide habitat for Grouse. Europeans in Australia also used fire to clear land and provide green pick for cattle in forests.

Many of the small and medium sized native mammals have been exterminated from Victorian landscapes by foxes and cats. This original mammal fauna burrowed and dug over the soil, thus making it more permeable and water absorbent, and also spreading fungi which decomposed ground litter and wood. These changes may have increased fire risk by allowing build-up of combustible material.

The practice of 'burning out' unburnt patches of a fire ground should be avoided as these unburnt areas are refuges for wildlife.

Likewise the practice of removal of "hazardous" trees from the perimeter of a planned burn should cease. Old growth trees and stags are essential habitat for some fauna so should be protected from fire during planned burns (raking around, damping down).

Removal of trees increases carbon in the atmosphere, which is one cause of increasing global temperatures.

Planned burns should not be done by lighting up around the perimeter by helicopter and allowing the fire to burn in, as this increases the intensity of the fire, and prevents some fauna from escaping the fire.

Clearing for firebreaks is also questionable, as they are no obstacle to a catastrophic fire.

Clearing of roadsides is idiocy. Convenient, and a bounty for loggers, but idiocy. The trees cannot possibly all be hazardous. Removal of genuinely hazardous trees would be acceptable. Unfortunately, Regional Roads Victoria under the Roads Act 2004 can do whatever it likes with roadside vegetation, but what DELWP does is another matter.

National Parks and other lands reserved for native flora and fauna should get special treatment and protection. But fire will have to be used in conjunction with elimination of feral species, and restoration of habitat and species where possible.

Scientific Reference Areas should be protected from fire otherwise they serve no purpose, although most of them have already been deliberately burnt at least once.

Some species can only survive in long-unburnt areas e.g. rainforest, mallee fowl and some other birds, and some mammals and lizards, so these areas should be identified and protected from fire as far as possible

Increasing temperatures and drought periods will make catastrophic fires inevitable, so we can only work to minimise them

Consideration of the adequacy of existing administrative and funding mechanisms in place at a state level to support the operational response efforts

There is a severe lack of funding for fire prevention including for planned burns, and policy towards controlling wildfires is muddled, partly on account of the complexities.

In rural areas there is often strong pressure from farmers for planned burning, but this need only go back a little way from property boundaries.

Many people employed in the various fire agencies, appear to be pyromaniacs, or perhaps just maniacs, who regard the natural environment as a kind of war zone. The bigger the fire the more thrilling it can be. And the more overtime that can be earned.

It would be interesting to have a history of the Mueller Road wildfire of December 2017, because from what I have been able to glean, the fire began with a lightning strike in a tree in a swamp and could have been extinguished within 24 hours, but turned into a major fire. Apparently, a crew was sent to investigate the burning tree, but decided it was not likely to spread fire, and left it unattended overnight. It is impossible to get any official information in the public arena about these kinds of events, even though the fire agencies must have a lot of data.

Overall, what I am suggesting is that it might be cheaper and easier to prevent or reduce fire than to deal with the consequences of wildfires.