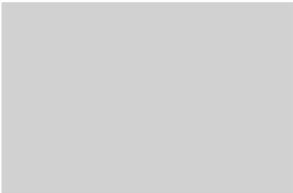


Inspector General of Emergency Management,

Please see below my submission to the Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian fire season

Gary Wills



## **Climate change and fire**

Long-term climate changes combined with short term weather changes are critical drivers of fire. As the climate warms, the frequency of severe fire danger days increases. A warming climate exacerbates the wildfire risks already posed by legacy issues such as inappropriate planned burning regimes, logging and arson.

To address IGEM terms of reference: *‘Consider all challenges and implications for bushfire preparedness arising from increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons as a result of climate change’* and *‘State evacuation planning and preparedness processes/practices and their effectiveness with an emphasis on remote/isolated communities and Victorian peak holiday season locations’*

- We need to continue to reduce carbon emissions the cause of climate change. But also under increasingly longer and more severe bushfire seasons there is an urgent need for comprehensive, strategic emergency evacuation plans and stronger wildfire preparedness, including support for private bushfire shelters, better planning regulations and other means of protection for citizens living in high bushfire risk areas.

## **Protecting key ecological assets and unburnt refuges**

After a wildfire there will often be patches of unburnt vegetation within the burn area that are of critical importance for the recovery of flora and fauna. Unfortunately there are threats to this recovery process from ‘burning out’, ‘salvage logging’ and introduced weeds and predators.

To address *‘In considering effectiveness of Victoria’s operational response to the 2019-20 fire season, IGEM should particularly consider: planning and response mechanisms to protect biodiversity threatened by bushfire’*

- Islands of unburnt vegetation within burn areas must be protected from ‘burning out’ by fire crews, whenever possible. The burning of these natural refuge areas increases the ecological impacts of wildfire and inhibits the recovery of plants and wildlife.
- ‘Salvage logging’ compounds the impacts of both fire and logging, and subjects fire-affected forests to mechanical disturbance during the critical recovery stage of the vegetation and should not be allowed in fire impacted regions. In addition, there needs to be much clearer regulation and assessment of hazardous tree removal to avoid the wholesale roadside clearing that happened in this fire season.

## **Rapid response and aerial firefighting**

The capacity for aircraft to get quickly to the point of ignition of a wildfire is paramount for the protection of both the community and of our natural heritage. Victoria currently has a fleet of 50 aircraft – but it should be expanded and strategically employed across the state. Federal and state funding should be significantly increased, allowing effective aerial control of ignition points in remote areas of the state.

To address IGEM terms of reference *‘Consideration of the adequacy of existing administrative and funding mechanisms in place at a state level to support the operational response efforts’* and *‘In considering the timeliness and effectiveness of activation of Commonwealth assistance, and Commonwealth resource availability’*

- There is an urgent need for increased capacity for control of fire at the point of ignition. We need a radical increase of secure state and federal funding to support the operational costs of fighting wildfires before they become uncontrollable in both remote and populated areas.

## **Strategic approach to fuel reduction and planned burning**

Between 2003-04 and 2016-17 the Snowy district in East Gippsland has had more planned burning than any other district in Victoria. Planned burns can be *ineffective* in reducing wildfire risk when they fail to reduce risk on days of severe fire danger. Planned burns can be *counterproductive* at reducing risk whenever young post-fire regrowth is more flammable than long-unburnt forests – a situation that can last for decades.

To address IGEM terms reference *‘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’*

- Planned burns and other fuel reduction processes (such as slashing) should be directed to where they are most effective: close to assets such as towns in need of protection.
- To reduce the flammability of the landscape, Victoria needs to set targets to protect and promote the growth of older vegetation in those forest types where older growth is historically less flammable than younger post-fire growth.
- Broadscale planned burning can reduce the abundance of critical wildlife habitat features, such as tree hollows and hollows in logs. A strategically planned burning program that minimizes ineffective and counterproductive burns is also critical for biodiversity protection.
- Victoria needs to improve pre and post-fire monitoring of flora and fauna, and pre and post-fire monitoring of fuel loads. Favourable ecological and flammability outcomes should be incorporated into risk management.