

SOUTH EAST TIMBER ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE 2019-20 VICTORIAN FIRE SEASON

1. Introduction

South East Timber Association (SETA) members advocate for policies that allow for active and adaptive management of native forests on both private and public land. SETA expects government policies and practices will maintain environmental values in the long term.

A number of SETA members have extensive fire mitigation and firefighting experience. This submission draws on that experience and observations of the positive and negative changes to bushfire mitigation and response that have occurred since the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Report.

2. The Safer Together Policy

The key issue that will be covered is the 2015 decision to move to discard Recommendation 56 of the Report, which stated: *"The State fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of prescribed burning based on an annual rolling target of 5 per cent minimum of public land."* This recommendation was replaced by the Safer Together policy. SETA East Gippsland members have a number of concerns about this policy. Key elements of the Safer Together Policy are outlined in extracts from departmental publications below.

"In 2015, the Victorian Government set out a new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria called Safer Together. Safer Together outlines an approach to reducing the risk of bushfires to Victorian communities, which focuses on how effective our actions are in reducing risk." (Source Gippsland Region Joint Fuel Management Program 2018/19 – 2020/21).

"As part of the Victorian Government's bushfire management strategy Safer Together, DELWP has set a state wide target to maintain bushfire residual risk at, or below, 70 per cent. This means the risk of a major fire, like Black Saturday, would be reduced by about a third.

The Safer Together approach means that local communities, property holders and land and fire agencies are more involved in decision making about bushfire management all year round. This new approach sees our management moving from a hectare target for planned burns, to a risk reduction target for bushfire management. It means a more integrated approach across public and private land, with fuel management being just one in a range of different management actions we will take to protect lives, homes jobs and the environment."

As at 30 June 2019, DELWP and its partners had treated approximately 130,000 hectares of public land using planned burning and further 11,000 hectares of mechanical treatment, resulting in a bushfire residual risk of 67 per cent."

"Performance exceeds the target due to completion of the highest priority planned burns across the state. The amount of area impacted by bushfire also contributed to the result." (Source DELWP Annual Report 2019).



SouthEastTIMBERassociation

South East Timber Association Inc admin@southeasttimberassociation.com

Despite the claim that the Safer Together approach would mean local communities and property holders are more involved in decision making about bushfires, during the 2019-20 bushfire season, the Andrews Government refused to release the Victorian forest fuel load maps. Premier Andrews claimed that refusing to release the maps claimed on Sky News on 5 February 2020, *"This is just common sense. We are not going to provide every arsonist in Victoria with a to do list."*

It is ironic, that up until four years ago, the maps were routinely published. It would seem that withholding the maps coincided with the commencement of the Safer Together approach. If the communities in fire prone areas are to be more involved in decision making, having access to fuel load would provide the most critical information needed to inform communities of the bushfire risk they face.

Recommendation 1

It is recommended, in the interests fully involving the public in decision making on bushfire management, the Andrews Government immediately release the Victorian Forest Fuel Load Maps.

The Safer Together approach is supposed, among other things, to protect the environment. With over 320,000 hectares of predominantly native forest, burnt in East Gippsland in the 2019-20 fire season, it would seem the Safer Together approach has failed to protect a major environmental, public land value.

A photo of native forest, north of Bairnsdale, Victoria, "protected" by the Safer Together approach is below. Is the minimisation of broadscale low intensity burning, delivering acceptable biodiversity, soil and water outcomes?



The bushfire residual risk calculation, takes the area burnt by wildfire into account, when determining whether the government has kept the residual risk under the target of 70 percent. If less planned burning contributes to more area burnt by wildfire, the government can still meet the residual risk target of 70 percent or less.

Recommendation 2

It is recommended that the full details of residual risk modelling and assumptions be released to the public. It is also recommended that a truly independent panel of bushfire research scientists, with strong practical and theoretical understanding of bushfire behaviour and fire ecology, be appointed to review the validity of the outputs from the Bushfire Residual Risk model.

3. Bushfire Fuel Management Targets Options Analysis

In the "Review of Performance Targets for Bushfire Fuel Management on Public Land", April 2015, the Inspector General for Emergency Manager, Mr Tony Pearce submitted Recommendation 1:

"Over the long term, a hectare-based target is unlikely to create sufficient incentive for DELWP to maximise the risk reduced through planned burning."

In part, the report argued: *"A hectare-based planned burning performance target does not effectively guide a fuel reduction program towards areas of highest risk reduction over the longer term. Nor does a hectare-based planned burning performance target create incentives to pursue alternate forms of risk reduction where planned burning is not possible."*

It is of deep concern the SETA members, that the authors of the report are suggesting that paid public servants will not do their jobs properly and agency heads and relevant ministers will not fund planned fuel reductions operations based on a hectare based approach, unless they are "incentivised."

Appendix 4 - The Options analysis: Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT University is contained in the Review of Performance Targets for Bushfire Fuel Management on Public Land dated April 2015.

Professor John Handmer from the Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT University Melbourne and Ms Adriana Keating from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg Austria, conducted an analysis of the hectare based approach and the risk based policy. Twelve criteria were used in the analysis and scored on a 0 to 4 scale and concluded: **"Aggregating the scores we found that the hectare based policy scored 13 out of a maximum 48, while the risk based policy scored 40 out of 48. Two assessors scored the policy target options independently with results within four points of each other."**

Scores for the first 8 criteria are below. Those under the first photo are for the hectares treated policy and those under the second photo are for the risk based policy.

SETA members, some with over 40 years of fire mitigation and firefighting experience are dumbfounded by the scoring determined by the authors of the options analysis. these academics appear to be lacking in the necessary fire, social, environmental and economic skills needed to provide an informed analysis on which of the two policies is most appropriate from a bushfire mitigation/risk management perspective.



SouthEastTIMBERassociation

South East Timber Association Inc admin@southeasttimberassociation.com



Planned burning activities (image courtesy of DELWP)

- | | |
|---|----------|
| Criteria 1) Impact of policy on risk to human life. | Scored 2 |
| Criteria 2) Impact of policy on risk to essential and community infrastructure, industries and the economy. | Scored 1 |
| Criteria 3) Impact of policy on resilience of natural ecosystems and ecosystem services. | Scored 0 |
| Criteria 4) Impact of policy on the risks from major fires. | Scored 1 |
| Criteria 5) Fuel reduction burn planning undertaken within a risk-based framework. | Scored 2 |
| Criteria 6) Impact of policy on understanding the role of bushfire in the Victorian landscape. | Scored 1 |
| Criteria 7) Role of community and stakeholders in planned burning decision-making. | Scored 1 |
| Criteria 8) Incentivizes shared responsibility. | Scored 1 |



SouthEastTIMBERassociation

South East Timber Association Inc admin@southeasttimberassociation.com



Public Native Forest East Gippsland, Victoria, Post 2019-20 Under the Risk Reduction Policy

- | | |
|---|----------|
| Criteria 1) Impact of policy on risk to human life. | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 2) Impact of policy on risk to essential and community infrastructure, industries and the economy. | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 3) Impact of policy on resilience of natural ecosystems and ecosystem services | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 4) Impact of policy on the risks from major fires. | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 5) Fuel reduction burn planning undertaken within a risk-based framework. | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 6) Impact of policy on understanding the role of bushfire in the Victorian landscape. | Scored 3 |
| Criteria 7) Role of community and stakeholders in planned burning decision-making. | Scored 4 |
| Criteria 8) Incentivizes shared responsibility. | Scored 4 |

Recommendation 3

It is recommended that the risk based policy component of the Safer Together program be discarded and bushfire risk mitigation again be underpinned by Recommendation 56 of the 2009 Royal Commission Report.

Peter Rutherford on behalf of the South East Timber Association Inc.

