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The Victorian Bushfire "Safer Together" and "Risk Based Approach to Bushfire Mitigation" Places Rural Communities in the Firing Line.

The disastrous 2009 bushfires in Victoria, cost 173 human lives, burnt over 2,000 homes and caused immeasurable environmental damage across 450,000 hectares, generally to the north and east of Melbourne. In keeping with dozens of other post bushfire disaster inquiries, Recommendation 56 of the *2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report* stated:

"The State fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of prescribed burning based on an annual rolling target of 5 percent minimum of public land."

This recommendation is based on decades of applied fire research and experience, that has demonstrated management of forest fuel levels across the landscape is the most effective bushfire risk mitigation tool available to public and private land managers.

The Victorian Government supported all of the 67 recommendations of the final report and committed to implementing each of them. The May 2011 report, *"Implementing the Government's Response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission"* noted, *"Although we are still in the shadows of the horror of the 2009 bushfires, after two relatively benign summers one can already sense growing complacency in the community about the threat of fire. As has been so tragically shown, such complacency can have devastating consequences."*

By 2013, there was ongoing and at times, quite ill-informed public debate over fuel reduction burning. Responsible land management agencies had been unable to meet the minimum annual burning target recommended by the Royal Commission. Consequently, the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor (VBRCIM) questioned whether an area-based performance measure would achieve appropriate risk reduction; and whether it was affordable or sustainable. Despite Victoria having prescribed burnt over 250,000 ha during 2012-13 (its highest annual burnt area since 1983), the VBRCIM recommended that the annual burning target be discarded in favour of a strategic risk-based burning approach.

In less than four years, the growing complacency appeared to have spread to Victorian public agencies responsible for mitigating risk to fire prone communities. In the six years following the 2009 bushfire disaster, the gross area of prescribed burning averaged 184,000 hectares or 2.39 percent of the 7.7 million hectares of state forests and parks and other land managed by the former Department of Sustainability and Environment, at the time of the Royal Commission Report. This was less than half of the minimum target recommended by the 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission.

The Gippsland Region Joint Fuel Management Program 2018/19 – 2020/21 report provided the following summary of how bushfire risk would be better managed under a strategic risk-based burning approach.

"In 2015, the Victorian Government set out a new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria called Safer Together."

Safer Together: A new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria sets out the Victorian Government's commitments to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria. It adopts a risk reduction target to guide fuel management, maintaining bushfire risk at or below a residual risk of 70% in the long-term.



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Residual risk, is the risk, on average, that bushfires will impact on life and property across the landscape. It is expressed as the percentage of the risk that remains after bushfire history and fuel management (mainly planned burning) activities are considered.

The Gippsland Region's contribution to meeting the state-wide JFMP risk reduction target anticipates 88,000 ha per annum of fuel management in the 2018/19-2020/21 JFMP.

A greater risk-based focus to operational planning has allowed Districts to improve consideration of ecosystem resilience.

The 'residual risk' concept is controversial, because it has never been fully explained in a published research paper outlining the assumptions and thinking that underpin it.

Fire practitioners, who gained their education and experience in the second half of the 20th century always understood that bushfire mitigation, achieved by undertaking annual prescribed or fuel reduction burning, across at least 8 percent of the forested landscape, did significantly reduce the risk of bushfires affecting properties. In Russian roulette terms the risk of a bushfire disaster under this approach, is similar to using a six-shot revolver, with a cartridge in one chamber.

Modern-day fire managers rely on computer simulations to justify fuel reduction burn levels that have demonstrably failed to provide adequate bushfire mitigation at a landscape level. Since the implementation of the so-called risk-based approach in Victoria, the average annual gross fuel reduction burn area for the three years 2017-19 has been less than 1.34 percent of the 7.7 million hectares of state forest, parks and other public land.

Based on the current fuel reduction burn levels and a residual risk of 70 percent, in Russian roulette terms, fire prone communities arguably face a 10-shot revolver, with up to seven loaded chambers. Regardless of what the computer models outputs may suggest, the reality is, fire prone communities now face a bigger wildfire risk than would be the case, if the 2009 Royal Commission fuel reduction burn levels were fully implemented.

What has the risk-based focus delivered for the fire prone communities and biodiversity of the Gippsland Fire Region in the 2019-20 fire season?

After three years of below average rainfall, more than 1.5 million hectares were burnt, with the tragic loss of five lives. Over 400 homes and 650 non-residential structures were damaged or destroyed. Despite giving improved consideration to ecosystem resilience, the risk-based approach has delivered massive destruction to biodiversity across the megafire affected areas. Using CSIRO 2007 estimated density of birds, mammals and reptiles per hectare, the likely toll of wildlife risk managed to death, would be in the order of 250 million.

Throughout the 21st century, public land and fire management agencies have increasingly turned away from forest fuel management at a landscape level, in many cases, to allegedly protect various threatened and other species from inappropriate fire regimes.

The risk-based approach has delivered a Silent Spring disaster for wildlife, reminiscent of DDT impacts on wildlife in the 1940-60s period. The difference is that government's took positive action to address the impacts of DDT. In the case of bushfire risk management, it appears that biodiversity receives little or no consideration under the residual risk methodology.



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Victorian government agencies claim *"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."* Three-dimensional forest fuel loads are at unprecedented levels across most forest areas in Victoria.

Fuel load maps are a critical piece of data needed by local communities and property owners, if they are to be more involved in decision making. Given the stated intent, it is unconscionable that at last report, these maps are still being kept secret by the Victorian Government.

Bushfire management experience gained across Australia over the past century has been thrown out by 21st century fire and ecologist academics and managers, who bring a one-dimensional view to the management of fire in the Australian landscape. The risk-based approach was destined to be and has proven to be a fool's errand. However, the Victorian Government continues to accept advice from academics, with little or no experience in the line of fire, while ignoring decades of hard won experience in the real world of bushfire risk mitigation.

The Safer Together policy, from a biodiversity perspective, is most aptly described as a public relations slogan to die for.



Forest Ecosystems North of Bairnsdale Victoria, Protected by the Risk-based Approach to Forest Fuel Management. Part of a Growing Area of Australian Native Forest Affected by Megafire Induced Silent Spring Phenomenon. Photo James Neville-Smith



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