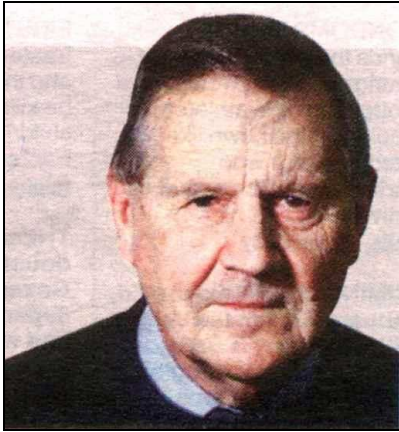


BUSHFIRE LOSSES CAN BE MINIMISED, SAYS FIRE EXPERT

Athol Hodgson, President of Forest Fire Victoria and an internationally recognised expert on forest fires, said today that bushfire losses could be minimised.



Mr Hodgson

He said of the large number of fires that burnt hundreds of thousands of hectares across Victoria last week, only three caused most of the deaths and destruction. These started in national and state parks on January 20, and remained small during calm weather over the next two days. Mr Hodgson said that those responsible for controlling the fires committed the first cardinal sin of firefighting, namely, failing to make an immediate attack on fire outbreaks with sufficient force.

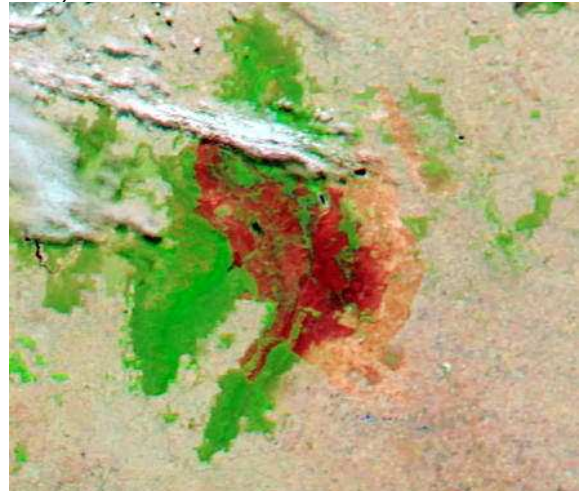
A valuable opportunity was lost. Temperatures and wind strength increased on January 22, and the fires became uncontrollable, feeding on fuels that had accumulated over decades.

The bushfires burnt large areas with an intensity and uniformity alien to the natural processes that our native forests require for their biodiversity and sustainability. They burst out of the parks on to private property with distressing effects.

Satellite images courtesy of NASA



Grampians National Park fire under influence of NW wind



Showing burnt area after SE wind change

The same failures, lack of planned burning of forest fuels and failure to launch rapid and vigorous initial suppression action, occurred in the alpine fires of 2003, again with massive fire spread and a catastrophic outcome.

Mr Hodgson gave an example of a potentially worse series of fire incidents that occurred in January 1985 but with a far better outcome. In mid-January an unprecedented number of fires started from lightning strikes. One hundred and eleven (111) fires started on public land between late afternoon on 14 January and 0900 hours the next day.

Many of the lightning strikes in forest areas started in remote, inaccessible mountain country where fire fighting was difficult, hazardous and time-consuming. They burnt more than 150,000 ha and had a perimeter in excess of 1,000 km before they were brought under control. About one-third of the perimeter had to be established and held in steep mountain country where there were no roads.

An unprecedented effort was made in the Buffalo National Park to minimise damage to Park values from both the fire and fire fighting. Ground crews supported by fire bombing from aircraft constructed control lines on steep rocky escarpments and successfully held the fire out of sensitive areas and ski slopes. The effort was justified by the result. Much of the Park remained unburnt.

The campaign mounted to fight the 1985 fires was the largest undertaken up to that time. At the peak of the campaign more than 3,000 people were on (or supporting) the fire fronts. Major equipment used included 75 bulldozers, 400 tankers, 20 helicopters and 16 fixed-wing aircraft.

At the same time, the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands was heavily involved in assisting the Country Fire Authority with major fires at Anakie, Werribee gorge, Avoca, Broadford and Beechworth, and in fighting a large fire that entered Victoria from NSW that burnt 7,600 hectares before being brought under control on 19 January.

Whilst the fight was going on the potential for damage to life, property and forest values from the fires, was enormous. For a period of two weeks settlements at Harrierville, Freeburg, Bright, Porepunkah and down the Ovens Valley as far as Myrtleford, were directly threatened, as were tourist facilities on Mt Buffalo and Mt Hotham, and pine plantations at Koetong.

No one died in the fires, only one house (unoccupied) was destroyed and the damage to assets was, compared to last week, miniscule.

These fires were brought under control without any help from the weather.

(The full Departmental report on those fires can be found at Appendix 3.2.2, The Facts Behind the Fire. on this web site)

A key factor in achieving control of bushfires at that time was an extensive program of fuel reduction burning. Our native forests must burn because ecologically, they require fire to survive. We who love and benefit from them must learn to live with forest fires. But neither the forests nor the community need or benefit from feral wildfires.

The collapse of prescribed burning programs that modified forest fuels over decades before the mid-1980s is well documented and has been criticised by the Auditor General.

The amount of prescribed burning doubled in 2005, but coming from a low base, the program is still far short of what can and must be done.

Bruce Esplin, Emergency Services Commissioner, reported on the botched prescribed fire lit in Wilsons Promontory on March 21 last year. Three months ago he reported systemic and cultural shortcomings in firefighting practice.

He said the separation of sections of the Department of Sustainability and Environment into bodies such as Parks Victoria and Vic Forests caused a serious disruption in the management of resources for firefighting.

The question must be asked: have we learned anything from the past? Apparently not much. The failure to control the few fires that started on January 20 is symptomatic of political and policy shortcomings at the highest level.

We salute the volunteer firefighters and others who put themselves at risk to save lives and property during events not of their making. We also salute those who work in our parks and forests, doing their best with a difficult job. They are seriously hampered by the problems identified by Mr Esplin, by absurd regulations, protocols and lack of political support.