

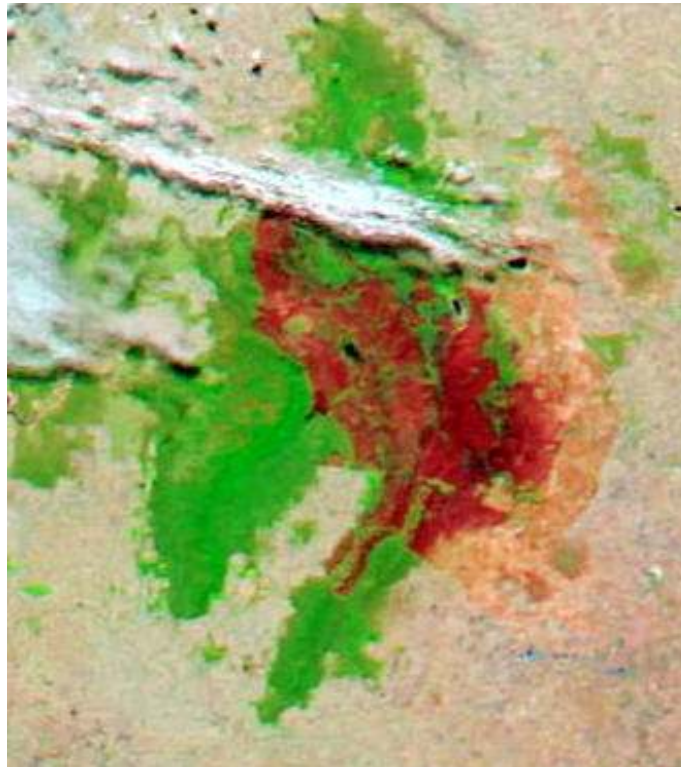
FOREST FIRE VICTORIA NEWS

ISSUE 6 - JULY 2006

THE FERAL FIRES RETURN!

REPEAT OF 2003 SAGA—SAME MISTAKES MADE IN 2006!

The question must be asked: Have we learned anything from the Feral Fires of 2003 that scorched more than one million hectares of forest and almost 100,000 hectares of private land? In reviewing the experience of the 2006 fire season with its litany of burned parks and forest in Victoria, Forest Fire Victoria says - obviously not.



Grampians fire -30 January

The Chairman of Forest Fire Victoria, Athol Hodgson, cites the Grampians Range fire as one example. This started from a single lightning strike on Thursday 19 January 2006 near Mt Lubra in the Grampians National Park, which is 250km WNW of Melbourne.

The weather was kind to fire fighters in the first few days. On Sunday 22 January high temperatures, low humidity and strong wind developed. As control had not been achieved, the fire became uncontrollable.

In a few hours, 120,000 ha of National Park and adjoining private property were burnt.

Two people died; 26 houses, 22 woolsheds, 2,600 beehives, 1,500 km of fencing, more than 60,000 farm animals and very significant quantities hay and pasture were destroyed. The numbers of native mammals and birds that died can only be guessed.

The same conditions blew a small fire in Brisbane Ranges National Park out of control. Despite significant property loss, there was no loss of life.

These fires mirror the fires caused by lightning in the Alpine area in 2003 that burned in benign weather for nine days. On the tenth day the weather changed, several fires became uncontrollable, and joined together. More than 1 million hectares of Parks and forests were scorched in one vast conflagration. More than 90,000 ha of private property were also burnt.

The fire at Mt Lubra started on the western slopes of the Serra Range in rocky country difficult to access with bulldozers and vehicles. It was the sort of fire that twenty years ago, would have prompted an immediate response by aircraft dropping fire retardant chemicals, plus hand tool work by firefighters rappelled from helicopters to control the fire while it was small.



Athol Hodgson

Mr Hodgson said that hard-hitting rapid response to lightning fires has been used since the mid - 1960's, when the Grampians firebombing base was built at Victoria Valley, 17 km from where the Mt Lubra fire started.

He said that the base has been used many times to control fires caused by lightning. It was upgraded in 1998 so larger modern fire bombers can use it safely. The base would also have been used to transport firefighters by helicopter to the outbreak.

Further, at least six crews of firefighters are employed annually and trained to rappel and/or "hover exit" from helicopters to attack small fires that start in remote places that are not easy to access by vehicle or by foot. The facilities and the personnel were available at the time of the Mt Leura fire, and the aircraft were on contract. Why were they not deployed?

For reasons not yet explained, the initial response to the fires committed the first cardinal sin of firefighting, namely, *failing to make an immediate attack with sufficient force.*

When the initial response failed to keep the fires small they became feral, burnt out of control at intensities well beyond the capability of any suppression technique.

The fires scorched large areas with an intensity and uniformity alien to the natural processes that our native forests require for their bio-diversity and sustainability. And they burst out of the public land onto private property with distressing effects, he said.

Lightning fires are regular natural events but the large-scale fires that burnt the Grampians and Brisbane Ranges this year and the Alpine area in 2003 were not natural. Fuels that accumulated over decades where natural fires had, of necessity, been deliberately extinguished in dangerous times fed those fires. Little or nothing had been done to reduce those accumulating fuels by planned burning or any other means in less dangerous times.

The lack of planned burning is well documented. In 1992 the Auditor General found that the Department of Conservation and Environment had failed to achieve its planned fuel-reduction targets in three consecutive seasons and that those areas the Department identified as warranting the highest level of protection to human life, property and public assets received the lowest level of protection. And in 2003 the Auditor General found that since 1994, fuel reduction burning has never met the Department's planning and operational targets.

The result is that there is now too little of the right, and too much of the wrong, kind of fire in our forests. Our native forests must burn because eucalypts require fire to survive. We who love and benefit from them must learn to live with forest fires. But not high intensity feral fires!

The question must be asked: Have we learned anything from the past? Apparently not; Mr. Bruce Esplin, Emergency Services Commissioner, reporting on the botched prescribed fire lit in Wilsons Promontory National Park on 21 March 2005 found systemic and cultural shortcomings in firefighting practice and said the separation of sections of the Department of Sustainability and Environment into bodies like Parks Victoria caused a serious disruption in the management of resources for firefighting.

A public forum organized by the Stretton Group revealed anecdotal evidence that the shortcomings identified by Mr. Esplin at Wilsons Promontory were not remedied before lightning started the single fire in the Grampians and others in the Brisbane Ranges in 2006 and that those shortcomings contributed to the extent and severity of the fires.

Even before the fires in the Grampians and Brisbane Ranges were extinguished Premier Bracks said the response by the emergency services was the "best ever."

The Premier is demonstrably wrong. There have been far better outcomes in the past from fire events started by lightning in places and weather similar to the events on 19/20 January 2006.

The failure to quickly control the few fires that started on 19/20 January 2006 when they were small and to limit the damage they caused when they went feral, shows political and policy shortcomings at the highest level. Those who work in our parks and forests and the volunteer firefighters who support them, do their best at a difficult and dangerous job. But they are seriously hampered by the problems identified by Mr Esplin, by absurd regulations, protocols and lack of political support.

The Government Task Force response to these shortcomings allocated \$10.8 million for forest restoration and to get communities back on track. This is looking backwards. Hard won experience shows that with the deployment of proven fire prevention and first attack practices, particularly broad scale prescribed burning, the risk of uncontrollable feral fires is significantly diminished. This is achieved at much less cost to the taxpayer than the alternative, wide spread destruction of social, economic and environmental values from out of control, feral fires.

Victoria's forest fire management is in a parlous state and urgently requires inspired leadership starting at the top political level.

This leadership must recognize that answers lie in implementing broad scale fuel reduction programs, not in learning to live with the bushfires or how to respond to them better. Without this recognition and the political will to commit the necessary resources, feral fires will return next summer, and keep returning relentlessly year after year. The health of our water catchments and the bio-diversity and sustainability of our native forests have been severely impacted and their future is in the balance.

THE FIRST CARDINAL SIN OF FIREFIGHTING :

Failing to make an immediate attack with sufficient force.