

Crikey email news, April 2009.

11 . Prescribed burns are prejudging the bushfire inquiry

Lionel Elmore writes:

The Royal Commission into the Victorian bushfires began its formal proceedings in Melbourne yesterday. Elsewhere, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Parks Victoria (PV) and the Country Fire Authority began "regeneration burns" in Holy Plains National Park in South Gippsland -- one of 27 official departmental fires now burning across the state -- pre-empting the outcome of the Royal Commission in a none-too-subtle way by burning yet more public, protected land. That these fires have been started without any pre-fire surveys of mammals, birds, frogs or reptiles these National Parks were established to protect, is just icing on the cake.

Jack Rush, counsel assisting the Royal Commission, was reported on the ABC's [Lateline](#) last night saying:

The purpose of prescribed burning is not to prevent fire from occurring, but to reduce the intensity of fire, its rate of spread and the difficulty of suppression...

It has been said once a fire has started, fire intensity and the speed in which fire spreads are affected by fuel loads. Of three factors influencing fire behaviour, the quality and arrangement of fuel is the only factor that can be altered by man before an unplanned fire starts.

In that much he is right -- but he is assuming that "the factor that can be altered by man" is increased fuel reduction burning. Mr Rush is coming down firmly on the side of current popular opinion, opinion driven by an unprecedented campaign by government departments and the forest industry to blame the Black Saturday fires on greens and a lack of fuel reduction burning.

Like the hundreds if not thousands of people affected by these fires he is relying entirely on the advice of the government departments and forest industry science. Departments who have built empires by lighting more fires in the last six years than ever before in Victorian history and an industry that profits from post-fire salvage logging.

Victorians -- indeed the Australian public -- deserve one hell of a lot better than this.

We first need to know what actually constitutes fuel reduction burning in the bureaucracy's eyes. Does this include ecological burning, regeneration burns, bushfires, back burns etc that continue within "control lines" weeks after fires have passed? Surely all fires reduce fuel. The ignorance of the press, especially the ABC -- the official fire industry broadcaster -- is palpable. This leads to the continual understating of the areas of the State burned by DSE.

The idea that there has not been enough burning, may well be little more than dangerous popularism driven by an almost colonial fear of the untamed Australian landscape.

When the Royal Commission actually sorts out how much burning there should be and where, when and by whom, it will also need to establish whether this burning increases the fuel loads or reduces them. Heresy? No, common sense. Not all fires reduce fuel. Where a fire kills young trees and similar vegetation and leaves it standing, dead, the fuel loads

have been increased, sometime radically for many years. Look at this patch of recently burned bush:



Opening up the bush also increases wind speed that can make fires hotter and travel faster. As a community we need to know where such burning has had negative affects now more than ever before.

When the bush is burned frequently common sense -- if not forest science -- dictates that plants that thrive on fire will benefit. That is a group that does not include tree ferns, rainforest species or closed canopy forests with mossy damp understorey. Plants that are more flammable like bracken will go gangbusters.

The Royal Commission is already at a turning point. Rather than "serving lobby groups and popularist politicians" it can establish statistically the relationship between uncontrolled fire frequency "the rate of spread and difficulty of suppression" for the scores of various bush types that have already been burned.

The use of sediment cores from lakes and ponds will reveal the changes in fire frequency over the last few hundred or even thousand years. Results from these cores may scientifically explain why the oldest unburned forests in National Parks and Melbourne's water supply catchments resist fire far better than those frequently burned.

The Victorian public deserve far better than popularist driven guesswork and a forest bureaucracy keen to seize this moment and turn it to its advantage.

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