

## **Victorian Farmers Federation Policy on Bushfire Management**

In Victoria there are a range of State, regional and local agencies responsible for fire prevention, response and recovery.

The farming sector has long played a part in fuel load reduction, fire suppression and recovering from devastating impacts on property and livestock. Amongst the farming community there is a breadth of local knowledge and resources willing to be engaged.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission investigated the causes of, the preparation for and response to the Black Saturday bushfires. It made a broad range of recommendations around reducing risks and impacts of fire and prioritising primacy of life in Government policy.

The Victorian Government committed to implementing all of the Royal Commission's 67 recommendations when it was elected in 2010. As the State Government implements new operational protocols and bushfire mitigation plans, the efficacies of these reforms are tested in every bushfire event. Following each bushfire season the Government should ensure it has dedicated resources to improve on its ability to reduce bushfire risk and better respond to and recover from a bushfire.

The significant reforms to bushfire policy in recent years have lost some of the needed hands-on approach that empowers local farmers to prepare for, respond to and implement recovery from bushfire.

This VFF Policy for Bushfire Management has been prepared with the overarching objective of encouraging Emergency Management Authorities to better engage with farmers. There needs to be better recognition of farmers' rights, roles and responsibilities during a bushfire.

### **The Challenges**

The most recent bushfire season of 2013-2014 affected 463,000 hectares, there was a loss of 22,000 livestock and 3,000 km of fencing<sup>1</sup>.

The bushfires of February 2009 resulted in stock losses of more than 11,800, including more than 4,500 sheep, 4,000 cattle and 200 horses.<sup>2</sup>

During the 2012-2013 bushfire season, separate grass and bushfires affected up to 200,000 hectares of the State. There was a loss of 2,400 livestock and 1,300 kilometres of fencing was lost.<sup>3</sup>

The VFF want to see reduced delays in providing aid to animals affected during a bushfire, this includes allowing DEPI, Vets, and farmers access past roadblocks sooner.

The most recent bushfire season highlighted the need for improvement in fuel breaks and containment lines on public land, early response to fire, public communication, traffic management points and road reopening resources and processes. Planned burns and fuel breaks do not adequately protect farming properties with farmers reporting that they feel their open paddocks are used as fire breaks.

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<sup>1</sup> Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor – 2014 Annual Report

<sup>2</sup> Appendix A – Estimated cost of the Fires, Volume 1: The Fires and the Fire Related Deaths VBRC 2010

<sup>3</sup> Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor – 2013 Final Report

Farmers hold significant concerns that red tape and insufficient resources prevent adequate back-burning and fuel management on both public and private land.

Further, in recovery from bushfires, farmers have raised issues over the lack of support from government in reinstating land and fencing damaged in providing fire access points and building fuel breaks. Constructing containment lines on sensitive landscapes can have ongoing impact on recovery and productivity of the farming land for a number of seasons.

The VFF believes that discrepancies in public messaging can contribute to poor fire response, traffic and evacuation management. Currently, the public rely on a broad range of sources of information and not one complete source of information.

The VFF has consulted extensively among VFF members and Policy Committees to develop recommendations to address these issues and seek continued improvement in the way bushfire is managed.

## **VFF Recommendations to Government for Bushfire Management**

### **1. Preparation – Before**

- a. State emergency management agencies recognise and engage suitably equipped local CFA resources, owners of private firefighting equipment and volunteers in fuel load reduction on public and private land.
- b. Emergency management agencies ensure that sufficient resources are focused on a hands on operational approach which engages with local communities to prepare for and respond to bushfires.
- c. Victorian Police improve training of staff on Traffic Management Points to undertake a range of functions as part of a bushfire emergency including a better understanding of animal welfare aid requirements.
- d. The State establishes and funds a framework of Community Reference Groups to engage with community leaders. Community Reference Groups would enable improved local engagement on fire operational plans and fire management plans. The structure of reference groups should be established at State, regional and township level and should deliver actions in earnest.
- e. The State amend its Guidelines for Traffic Management Points (Emergence Response Only – A Status) to permit access by farmers to their land. The VFF encourage its members to have private firefighting equipment certified by the CFA for improved access during bushfires.
- f. The Guidelines for Traffic Management Points should provide farmers authorised access to a property beyond the Traffic Management Point in cases where the Traffic Management Point is located at a significant distance from the fire risk for the purpose of detouring traffic but unintentionally preventing reasonable access for landowners.
- g. The Commonwealth and State expand vegetation removal planning provision exemptions to reduce fuel loads and create fire breaks. There should be clearly defined exemptions

that apply state-wide for fuel reduction on private and public land. The distance from a fence that can be removed without a planning permit should be 10 metres or the height of the largest tree plus 1 metre, whichever is greater (as per VFF policy).

- h. Local governments use a standardised process for issuing permits to clear and burn for farming related needs. Standardised permit conditions should be made to reduce inconsistencies between local governments and CFA.
- i. The State establish a strategy to better provide sufficient fire breaks and containment lines within public parks and around public land to improve fire suppression and prevent private land being unnecessarily damaged during a bushfire event.
- j. The State Government prioritises roadside fuel reduction. Streamline approval process and red tape for agencies with fire management obligations. Engage local landholders to identify roadside areas requiring fuel reduction.
- k. Improve ease of contracting local landholders equipped to assist agencies in fuel reduction actions. Local governments should work with farmers to consult on standard provisions for farmers to be engaged to clear vegetation along roadsides.
- l. The State maintains its commitment to an annual rolling target of 5% of public land for its prescribed burning as per Royal Commission recommendations.
- m. The State should set up a public campaign aimed at improving awareness of landowners' rights and responsibilities in accessing land blocked by a Traffic Management Point.
- n. The State should continuously improve communication methods between emergency response agencies and private parties. Given the number of public and private parties involved in bushfire response, there should be strategies to avoid breakdowns in communication between emergency agencies.
- o. State Government implement improvements to electricity supply to reduce bushfire risk, such as the replacement of Single Wire Earth Return lines with three-phase power.
- p. Government invest in a campaign around surveying for arsonists on days of high bushfire risk.

## **2. Response - During**

- a. The State invest in communication technologies to ensure there is capacity for real time and accessible public information to show bushfire risk and location.
- b. The State introduce a resource responsible for updating website information (CFA, VicRoads or EMV) showing location and status of Traffic Management Points, bushfire conditions, evacuation routes and community shelters. This information should be a single online source that the public and the ABC radio can use to provide accurate and real-time information back to the community on fire advice and road closures.
- c. The State develop a strategy to collect relevant real-time information from on-ground sources where appropriate: there could be a contact point collating the information, passing the information to a reliable medium and the information would be obtained effectively and from an onsite party.

- d. The State should require telecommunication providers to monitor their infrastructure and maintain active service to rural communities during high risk bushfire periods.
- e. The State should establish a program of continuous improvement to mobile communications and cellular network capacity each bushfire season.
- f. The State should reduce deployment time of aerial firefighting aircraft for fire spotting purposes. Policy should ensure that arrival is timely to attack the head of the fire. Engaging resources before dawn for fire spotting following a storm event is considered likely to be highly successful in terms of tackling a fire before a wind change or change in weather conditions.
- g. The State should improve staffing arrangements and policies around Traffic Management Points to reduce delays to provide essential access to livestock. There should be a dedicated traffic management point decision maker with local knowledge in the Incident Control Centre to expedite authorised access to farmers, DEPI and Vets. There should be priority access to farmers to care for and provide first aid to livestock, particularly if there is a delay in Department of Environment and Primary Industries animal health staff arriving.
- h. The State Government should reduce the bureaucracy of authorising access past a Traffic Management Point during a bushfire. A TMP attendee or a single person at the Incident Control Centre should have power to approve access, subject to conditions, past a Traffic Management Point without delay when warranted regardless of the status of TMP.
- i. The State should develop a strategy to coordinate authorised access provisions for Vets / milk trucks and fodder / water delivery to access without delay past a Traffic Management Point.
- j. The State and local government increase resourcing of Access Safety Assessment Teams and arborists to reduce road reopening delays. The list should be shared for both State and municipal road reopening assessments.

### **3. Recovery - After**

- a. The State amend policies to provide expedited access for local Vets, DEPI and animal health staff to assist farmers to care for livestock and animals affected by the fires.
- b. The State should pay the full cost of fire control line rehabilitation where a control line was established by government agencies.
- c. Consistent with planned burns on public land escaping onto private land, the Government pay the cost of asset restoration resulting from damage caused during fire suppression back-burns undertaken by the fire agencies during a bushfire emergency.
- d. The State, working with the VFF, publish a set of rehabilitation standards for reinstating land, fencing and other assets with targeted timeframes to assist in working with private landholders.
- e. The State should share the burden of cost in replacing boundary fencing, public and private landowners on adjoining properties should be treated equally in terms of paying

for fencing under the Fencing Act 1968, particularly after the devastation of a bushfire event.

- f. The State Government prioritise the return of electricity to farming enterprises where animal welfare and production systems depend on the supply of power.