

Opinion

A simplistic approach to burnoffs is too risky

Don't make an ash of it

Increasing our fuel-reduction burn target is not the answer, writes PHILIP INGAMELLS

THE main problem with the Victorian Government's acceptance of a large statewide fuel-reduction burn target is that such a simple solution won't solve a complex problem.

Burning for fuel reduction across the state isn't just a process of giving Victoria a regular haircut.

For a start, we need to understand something of the long process of evolution of Victoria's plants and animals.

Bushfires have been around for at least 50 million years, and our 100,000 species of native plants and animals had established a complex relationship with fire long before Aboriginal burning took place.

As a result, we have inherited ecological systems where some species and communities like fire a lot, some respond well to occasional burns, but others don't like fire at all.

So to be sure we can protect our often struggling native plants and animals we have to be careful where, when and how often we burn.

Also, while some areas are relatively easy to burn for fuel reduction, fire in other areas such as our tall ash forests is difficult if not impossible to control.

And there are few days each year when the weather allows controllable management burns.

Weather predictions have to be good for days, if not weeks ahead to avoid fire flaring out of control at a later date.

This makes the all-important burns near townships particularly difficult, as they generally take large resources over a long time.

But unfortunately, burning near townships contributes little to achieving a large statewide target.

By setting a large target, we have been encouraging our land managers to concentrate burns in remoter areas such as the Mallee and Wimmera, and the forests of far East Gippsland.

Under the 130,000ha annual



Off target: a larger statewide burn target will not deliver a major improvement in public safety across Victoria.

target, there have been so many burns in the Mallee that long-unburnt areas are now hard to find. That's sad, because research also shows many Mallee birds and animals need those old areas to survive.

Now, with a much larger target accepted by the Government, we can expect far more damage in these areas, but probably little improvement in public safety across the state.

That's not to say large burns should never happen, but they are happening too often in many places, and at the expense of the smaller strategic burns crucial for community safety.

It gets more complicated.

By burning some ecosystems often, we can actually encour-

age the growth of those fire-loving trees and shrubs, and not surprisingly they are often the most flammable ones.

So in the long-term we might be actually increasing the fire hazard in some places — the very thing we are trying to avoid.

Fortunately — though it's not always honoured in practice — Victoria already has a quite sophisticated process for planning management burn.

Public land is divided into four different zones.

In the first, fuel-reduction burning is undertaken purely for public safety.

In the second, safety is still the prime objective for burning, but the impacts on biodiversity are also considered.

In the third zone, burning should primarily be designed to support biodiversity, but can also help fuel reduction.

The fourth zone, a no-burn zone, applies to areas that can't handle fire such as rainforests, and important tourist sites like waterfalls.

We should support that sensible planning process and use it to develop a series of clever burn targets across the state.

These would be regional or local targets designed to take account local safety requirements and impacts on industry, and look after wildlife in local natural areas.

As the Bushfire Royal Commission has strongly recommended, burns should be scien-

tifically monitored for their fuel-reduction effectiveness and impacts on biodiversity.

Furthermore, the reporting on the results of that monitoring (as the commission has also recommended) should be publicly available.

Local people should contribute to, and be helped to understand, both the public safety and ecological objectives of burning regimes in their area.

The current situation, where someone in a vulnerable township in Gippsland is expected to be pleased because the statewide target was achieved through mega-burns in the far northwest of the state, is not sensible or sustainable.

Importantly, the commis-

sion's own expert panel said a 5 per cent annual target could only confidently be applied to what they called the "foothill forests" — largely the dry stringybark forests of the Wombat Forest and similar regions.

Yet somehow the commissioners, and now the Government, have decided Victorians could only comprehend a simplistic statewide target, even though it discourages good strategic management.

Victoria is possibly the most fire-prone region in the world, and the management of that situation is a serious and difficult issue.

• Philip Ingamells is Victorian National Parks Association Fire Project spokesman



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