

Review of the Code of Forest Practice on Fire management of Public Land

Submission by Hamilton Field Naturalists Club, May 2005

The subject of this submission is the disastrous long-term impact of current fire management and protection practices on biodiversity conservation in State Forests, National Parks and other Reserves. We propose some solutions to the problem of providing fire safety without destroying environmental values.

The community consultation process in 2004/05 in the Portland-Horsham State Forests region resulted in all parties agreeing that conservation of biodiversity is the most important principle for future management of the State Forests. It follows that all activities that affect the current and future biodiversity values need to be examined and, if necessary, modified to ensure that there are no long-term adverse consequences of their implementation. If that is not done then this community consultative process would be an empty exercise.

One practice that has a profound impact on the future conservation value of our forest and woodland reserves is the loss of mature/old hollow-bearing trees that have caught fire during control burns or wildfires – and the falling of many of these by the bulldozers and chainsaw of fire protection crews in the aftermath of the fire. Hollows are critical for the survival of many bird and mammal species in an area, including Powerful Owl and other species of owl, Red-tailed Black Cockatoo and other parrots, Brown Treecreepers, Yellow-bellied and Sugar Gliders, Brush-tailed Phascogales, Ring-tailed and other Possums. The loss of hollows is a loss of habitat.

Habitat is always lost due to fire, and lost due to measures taken to contain it or prevent a relight. The February 2005 fire in the Fulham Reserve-Black Range area is a recent testament to long-lasting damage – dozens of large, old, hollow-bearing trees were bulldozed or cut down in the wake of the fire. If fire management is not modified there will be few hollow-bearing trees left in that area, or other areas such as Cobobboonee. The photos presented here show the fate of one hollow-bearing but otherwise sound, very large Yellow Gum in the Black Range. There are very few other trees there of that dimension and age, yet it was cut down as “standard practice”. All around had been burned and the nearest patch of unburned, open farmland is 300 m distant.



(1) Protocols and action after significant large trees have caught fire in fuel reduction burns or wildfire:

There must be justification for any trees that are destroyed by bulldozer or chainsaw, and in each case where a significant tree is destroyed there must be *accountability*. Without that the present mentality will not change.

- Written protocols are required for assessing whether a particular tree is likely to be a danger in subsequent days (i.e. will possibly cause cinders to start a new fire distant from itself) – the intent here is to ensure that the matter is taken seriously and that trees are not just knocked over on the ad hoc whim of the operator.

- Written habitat assessment protocols are required, particularly for assessing the habitat/landscape/floristic significance of trees that have caught fire, and that this be consulted before any action is taken that would destroy the tree.
- Alternatives - if action is deemed to be necessary to extinguish a fire, and the tree has high habitat or other value, a non-destructive approach is mandatory. For example, in these follow-up operations, can a fire unit extinguish the fire from the ground? Time is generally not a limiting factor in clean-up operations. If not, could a cherrypicker unit be used in conjunction with the tanker to gain the necessary access to the seat of the fire? Is there any reason why such units could not be available as “standard equipment”, in the same way as bulldozers are used by DSE fire crews? Are we serious about biodiversity or not? There are some talented people around who could find ways of dealing with a problem fire.
- Reporting after the fire - how successful were we in controlling potential fire hazards yet not destroying the habitat values of old, hollow-bearing trees? How many were burned, or what percentage of those left? Without some sort of analysis it is easy to be complacent and find that all of the big, old trees have disappeared from our woodlands due to our carelessness.

(2) Protection of mature hollow-bearing trees before prescribed burning occurs

- Adopt a policy for protecting such trees that are likely to be vulnerable to fire – this should include removal of bulky material from around the bole of such trees before the fire is lit.
- Do not permit the bulldozing of the large, hollow-bearing edge trees around the burn (as is reported to have happened in the T&W Rd fuel reduction fire at Cobbobboonee)

(3) Protocols for fuel-reduction burns in summer-autumn

- Review the current protocols for burning in summer-autumn - most of the fires lit this autumn were damaging summer-time fires, much too hot, and some escaped later. The Cobobboonee fire, a 350 ha block at T&W Rd, was so hot (and so large) that it incinerated a dozen or more Potorroo (an endangered species) and other animals. That fire, and others, should never have been permitted until there had been a significant opening rain to dampen the fuel or fogs to achieve the same end. There is something seriously wrong with the protocols presently being used. No reasonable consideration is being given to the protection of the fauna and flora. The excuse given is that fuel reduction must be done – we agree, but it should not be done at the wrong time.
- A fauna & flora officer should be required to sign off on any fuel reduction burn before it begins. On present evidence there is no serious intent to protect fauna and flora. It is not sufficient for a fire officer to make a judgement alone. This is a serious matter but is virtually ignored on the ground. Fauna and flora guarantee legislation for threatened species and their habitat is being flouted – fire is a threatening process, and it is being disregarded. All fires should be regarded as “ecological burns”, with safeguards.
- Mosaic burning - we remain unconvinced by DSE forestry staff who contend that mosaic burning is being achieved. The areas burned are too large (several thousand hectares in some cases) - the burns in summer-autumn are too hot to allow patches of unburned bush to remain and so there is no mosaic. What we are seeing may well be the simplification of our forests and the loss of biodiversity.

(4) Early action to control wildfires

We think that better early suppression (e.g. by aerial attack) would see fewer bad escapes (e.g. the Fulham fire, where there was no apparent urgency to suppress the fire).

(5) Summer camp fires

We believe that camp fires in the summer fire season should be prohibited on all public reserves and State forest areas. That would immediately reduce the number of fires and help protect the environment.