



## Wildfire in National Parks and State forests

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[www.oren.org.au](http://www.oren.org.au) [www.melbournecatchments.org.au](http://www.melbournecatchments.org.au)

Since Black Saturday there has been a deliberate scaremongering campaign by anti-National Park extremists who falsely blame National Parks for wildfires that occur in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> National Park management has been falsely described as “lock it up and leave it”. Such statements deny the fire suppress strategies which have been actively implemented, such as fuel reduction and the many access tracks and fire breaks maintained for fire prevention in and around National Parks.

These extremists don't acknowledge fire risks in State forests where past management practices for logging have directly contributed to wildfires and historically diverted resources away from fuel reduction burns.

**The Royal Commission must examine the causes of wildfire in State forests that are specifically attributed to practices associated with logging.**

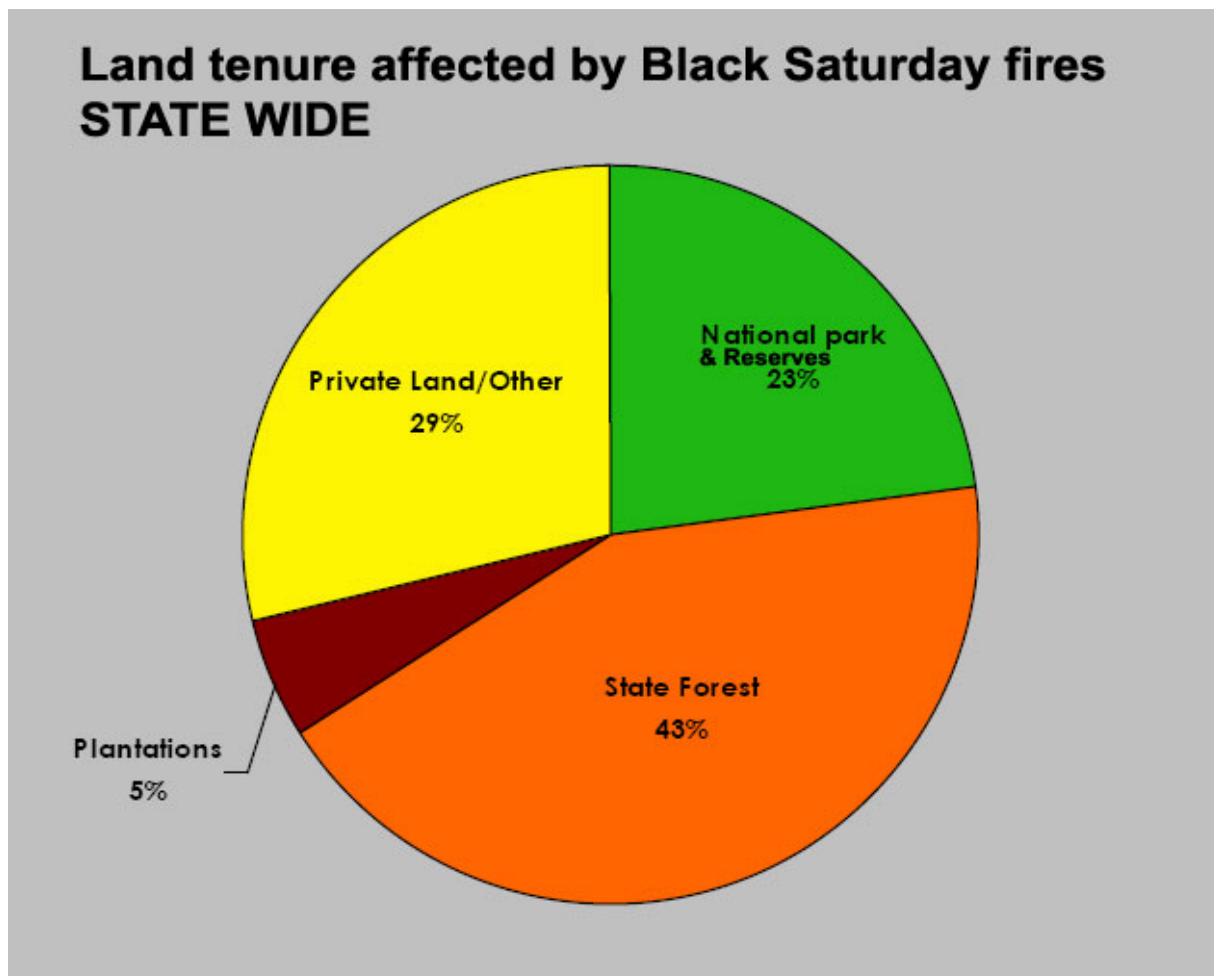
- 1. Less than a quarter of the statewide area burnt by fire started on Black Saturday was National Parks and reserves.**
- 2. Be it State forest or National park, it makes no difference to the fire suppression resources and strategies needed to manage fire on all forested public land.**
- 3. Historically resources have been diverted away from fuel reduction burns in favour of burning off clearfell logged areas to promote regrowth in State forests.**
- 4. Over the past two decades at least one in 20 wildfires have been started by logging industry practices in State forests.**
- 5. Killers fires that impact public land are often started on private cleared agricultural lands.**
- 6. Fuel reduction burning is difficult to conduct in State forest where mature regrowth has established in previously clearfell logged areas.**
- 7. The Royal Commission on the Black Saturday fires will independently re-examine management practices in State forests and National Parks.**

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<sup>1</sup> As detailed in OREN and MWCN submission to the Royal Commission.

**1. Less than a quarter of the statewide area burnt by fire started on Black Saturday was National Parks and reserves.**

Of the 430,000ha burnt by fires which started on Black Saturday, about 100,000 ha were within National Parks and 180,000 ha were in State forests where clearfell logging is permitted.<sup>2</sup>



Chris Taylor 2009, *Victorian February Fires. A Report on the Driving influences and land Tenures affected.*

**2. Be it State forest or National park, it makes no difference to the fire suppression resources and strategies needed to manage fire on all forested public land.**

All fire suppression on public land in Victoria is the responsibility of the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment's Fire Management Branch is responsible for wildfire protection and fire fighting in state forest, national, state or other parks, reserves or other Crown land. Other bodies, such as the Country Fire Authority, Parks Victoria and plantation managers, assist in both fire prevention and fire suppression activities.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority. *100 Day Report.* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, *Angahook-Otways Investigation, Discussion Paper* (Sept 2003) 82.

### **3. Historically resources have been diverted away from fuel reduction burns in favour of burning off clearfell logged areas to promote regrowth in State forests.**

There are three types of prescribed burns conducted on public land:

- (1) fuel reduction burns;
- (2) burning after clearfell logging to promote regrowth; and
- (3) burning for ecological purposes.

#### **Number of burns**

The Esplin Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian bushfires included an analysis of prescribed fires between 1991 and 2003. Esplin found that the number of burns conducted after logging dominated, representing an average of 63% of prescribed burns each year compared with 33% for fuel reduction (See Figure 10.1 next page).

#### **Area of burns**

However the average area burnt each year due to logging is tiny at only 2% compared with 90% for fuel reduction burns. Why? The average size of each logging burn is 24ha compared with 700ha for each fuel reduction burn (See Figure 10.2 next page).

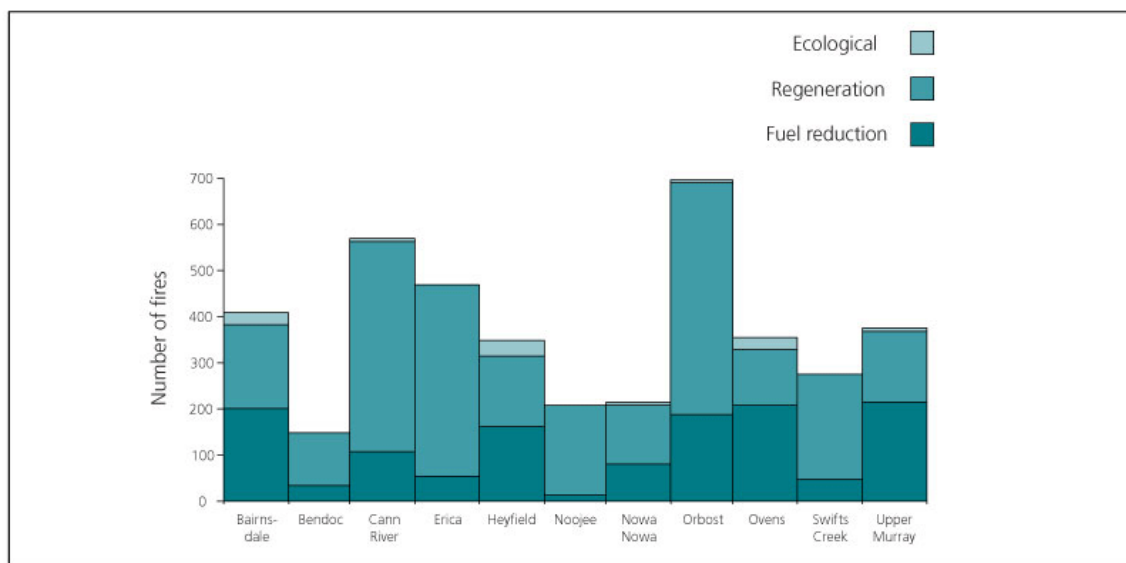
#### **Resources for burns**

There are only very limited days available to safely conduct fuel reduction burns, and a limited pool of qualified personnel to undertake this dangerous work.

The Esplin inquiry found that the limited resources to conduct all forms of prescribed burns have historically been diverted away from fuel reduction and ecological burns in order to prioritise post-logging burns.<sup>4</sup>

VicForests has acknowledged these causes for a historic lack of fuel reduction burns and has new arrangements in place to try and remedy the situation.<sup>5</sup>

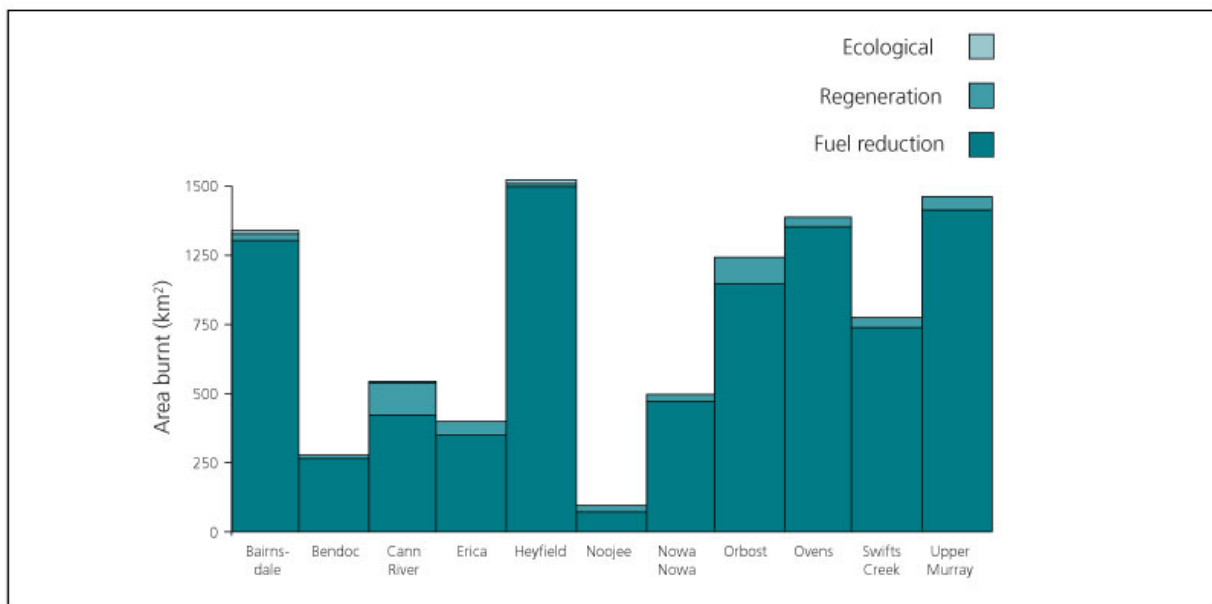
Figure 10.1: Numbers of Prescribed Fires Primarily for Fuel Reduction, Ecological and Regeneration Purposes by DSE District for the North East and Gippsland Regions; 1991 to 2003



<sup>4</sup> Bruce Esplin, Dr Malcolm Gill, Prof Neal Enright, State Government of Victoria, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires* (2003), paragraph 10.36, page 96.

<sup>5</sup> See VicForest letter at [http://www.oren.org.au/issues/fire/VicForests\\_letter.pdf](http://www.oren.org.au/issues/fire/VicForests_letter.pdf)

Figure 10.2: Aggregate area (km<sup>2</sup>; for Hectares Multiply by 100) of Prescribed Fires for Fuel Reduction, Ecological Purposes and Regeneration Conducted by each DSE District for the North East and Gippsland Regions; 1991–2003



Source for Figure 10.1 and 10.2: Bruce Esplin, Dr Malcolm Gill, Prof Neal Enright, State Government of Victoria, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires* (2003).

#### **4. Over the past two decades at least one in 20 wildfires have been started by logging industry practices in State forests.**

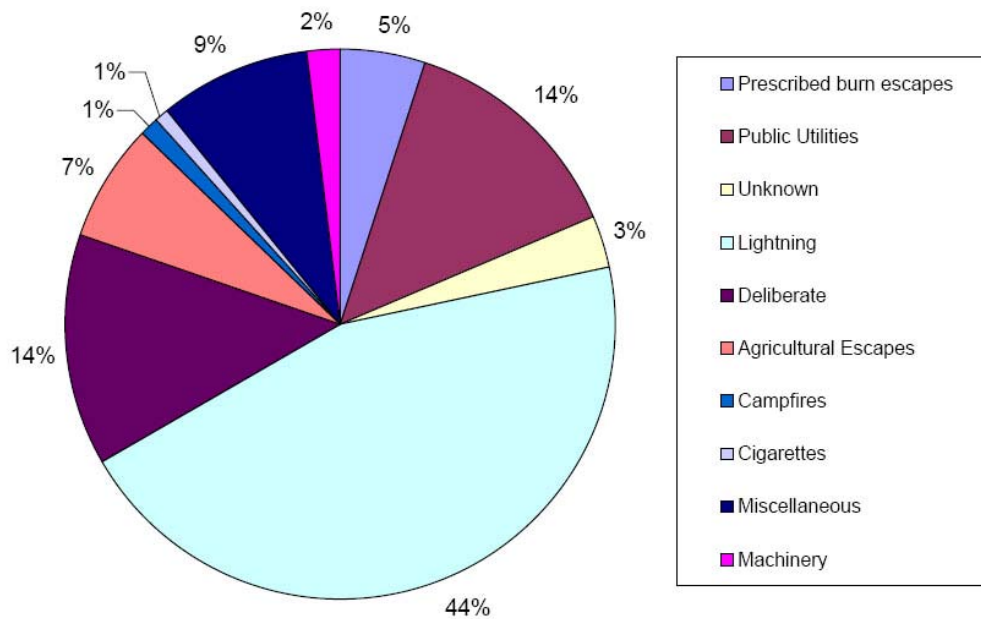
Serious wildfires have started by fires escaping from logging coupe burn-offs, logging machinery exhausts and chainsaws. DSE also admits that road construction for the purposes of logging may be a significant source of ignition.

There are also instances and records of forest industry activities impacting on starting fires through ignition from machinery and chainsaw operations. Opening new forest roads and tracks increases access, and while this can assist in getting to fires, it can also lead to more ignitions. Close to 25% of human caused fires on public land occur within 100 meters of roads and tracks and nearly 90% occur within one kilometre.<sup>6</sup>

DSE has a huge amount of information about fire starts on public land. However information is presented in a vague way.

<sup>6</sup> DSE Submissions 168C to Environment and Natural Resources Committee, *Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria* (June 2008).

**Figure 1.5: Causes of fire on Victorian public land by number of fires each year for the past 20 years.<sup>80</sup>**



This pie chart using DSE data<sup>7</sup> claims that 5% of all wildfires are started by prescribed burn escapes. Given that 63% of prescribed burns are for logging coupes then at least 3% of wildfire starts are attributed to logging coupe burn escapes. Combined with machinery fire starts (2%) this indicates that 5% or at least one in 20 fires started in State forests are by logging industry practices.

**5. Killers fires that impact public land are often started on private cleared agricultural lands.**

As indicated on the pie chart above, 7% of wildfires are agricultural escapes. The fires that claimed the majority of human life and destroyed property on Black Saturday were ignited on private land, which has been previously cleared for agriculture (in the case of Murrindindi and Kilmore East) or was by a roadside in a plantation area (Churchill). The Murrindindi, and Churchill fires had their initial runs - i.e. the fire gained its initial intensity - in plantations.

By the time the Kilmore East fires arrived at the Kinglake National Park, the fire had already claimed its first human casualties, destroyed property and burnt through logged-out State forests.

Similarly, before the Murrindindi Fire arrived at the Yarra Ranges National Park, it had already burnt through the heavily logged Toolangi State forest and Marysville.

<sup>7</sup> Environment and Natural Resources Committee, *Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria* (June 2008).

## **6. Fuel reduction burning is difficult to conduct in State forest where mature regrowth has established in previously clearfell logged areas.**

Regrowth in State forests after clearfell logging can become a bushfire hazard when it is over 10 years old. According to the Department of Sustainability and Environment:

more mature regrowth does burn vigorously as fire danger increases, and there are periods in the forest growth cycle where regrowth is both flammable and susceptible to damage by fire. While in this flammable and vulnerable state, the presence of regrowth makes managing prescribed burning more difficult. Patchy regrowth from minor forest uses is most difficult to protect.

Source: DSE Submissions 168C to Environment and Natural Resources Committee, *Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria* (June 2008).

The cumulative effect of clearfell logging over the past 40 years means extensive areas of State forest have been converted to even age stands of 'mature regrowth' over 10 years old that can 'burn vigorously'. As logging continues, more areas will be converted to this 'flammable and susceptible' state over time.

## **7. The Royal Commission on the Black Saturday fires will independently re-examine management practices in State forests and National Parks.**

Those trying to blame National Parks for wildfires and defended logging practise in State forests often cite findings of a Parliamentary Inquiry whose report was *Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria* (June 2008). They argue that some of the findings in this politically driven inquiry vindicate their views.

For example, finding 2.4 reads like a political statement and is not based on a fair and objective assessment of the facts as presented above:

### **Finding 2.4:**

The Committee finds that there is no evidence of an adverse impact by forestry operations on the level of prescribed burning.<sup>8</sup>

Parliamentary Inquiries are conducted by a committee of politicians (in this case ALP, Liberal and National Party MPs) who produce findings that are not necessarily free from bias and political prejudice.

An analysis of this 2008 Parliamentary Inquiry shows the report has been structured in way to avoid a fair and objective assessment of many of the contentious issues.

The Royal Commission is a politically independent process that has the opportunity to re-assess the contentious issues purportedly considered by the 2008 Parliamentary Inquiry. The very fact that the State Government has called a Royal Commission puts an end to any claim that the findings within the 2008 Parliamentary Inquiry have standing as the final word on contentious issues surrounding public land fire management.

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<sup>8</sup> Environment and Natural Resources Committee *Inquiry into the Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria*. June 2008, page 116.