



The 2009 fires: questions & answers

Recent fires

The Victorian National Parks Association shares the community's concern at the appalling loss of life in the recent fires in Victoria. We salute the efforts of those involved in fighting the fires, often placing themselves in considerable danger.

Why did these fires happen?

While some things seem to have clearly contributed to this catastrophe, particularly the dryness of the bush, extreme temperatures and high winds, we believe it is best to leave the investigation of the causes to the Royal Commission, which has been set up by the Victorian Government.

The Royal Commission will be an independent, evidence-based inquiry, with very broad powers to investigate all aspects of the fires.

Fuel reduction burns

The VNPA has supported the practice of science-based fuel reduction burning in national parks, conservation reserves and other public land for many years.

However, it is not the only way to reduce the impact of bushfires, and to be effective, burns must be done at the right time, and in the right place.

Burning other areas of bush purely for ecological reasons can also contribute to community safety.

How much fuel reduction burning is done in Victoria?

In the year 2007-2008, some 464 fuel reduction burns took place over 153,000 ha of public land in Victoria.

These burns were done in all areas of public land, including extensive burns in many national parks. This was an increase on the burning done in recent years, with an average of 350 management burns per year between 2003-2007.

Since 2003, a combination of management burning and wildfire has burnt nearly 3 million hectares of native vegetation in Victoria – close to half our public land.



Many plants have strategies to survive fire, but their capacity to recover varies with a fire's intensity, the period between fires, or the season.

Photo: Jenny Barnett

How are decisions made about where to burn?

Victoria's public land is divided into several fire management zones, which extend across all land tenures, including national parks and other conservation reserves. Regional fire plans within these zones are prepared by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, in consultation with land managers (Parks Victoria and local councils) and the CFA.

There is a public submission period, and plans are revised periodically.

Zones 1 and 2 are primarily for fuel reduction purposes to protect life and property. They are particularly designed to allow burns near townships, but also for the maintenance of large scale fuel-reduced corridors in bushland, including national parks.

Zone 3 is also primarily for fuel reduction, but generally allows a mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas. This leaves refuges for animals to escape to, and allows plants and animals to recolonise burnt areas after the fire.

Zone 4 applies where fire management is primarily for ecological reasons, and **Zone 5** is for areas where any fire may damage environmental or cultural assets. Zone 5 areas are generally quite small.

continued next page...



Climate scientists predict a future of more frequent, and more severe, bushfires.

How does fire affect natural areas?

Fire is as natural as rain and wind to most of the Australian bush. Indeed, since the Australian continent broke free from the supercontinent Gondwana, about 50 million years ago, the evolution of our unique plants and animals has largely been shaped by fire.

Today, many plants and animals actually depend on occasional fire for their survival.

But different plants and animals, and different plant communities, need fire at different times, different intensities and, most importantly, different frequencies.

Some vegetation types, such as grasslands and heathlands, can accommodate fairly frequent fire, while others start to lose species with fire frequencies less than 15 or more years.

Some small areas of bush, like rainforest pockets, don't like fire at all. Indeed Victoria has about 300 different ecological communities, each of which has its own requirements for fire intervals.

Can we do more control burns?

Probably, but it's not easy to do them safely. Control burns can only take place when moisture levels are low enough for the bush to burn, but not so low that the burn is likely to escape.

In addition, weather forecasts, including wind forecasts, must not present a threat in following weeks, as the smouldering remains of control burns can take off at any time, as happened in 2005 at Wilsons Promontory National Park.

Between January 2001 and winter 2005 there were 2151 prescribed burns on public land in Victoria, and 12 of these (less than 1%) significantly escaped the burn area.

As we burn more often, inevitably in less favourable conditions, the chance of escapes increases.

This is particularly difficult in the all-important areas around towns, where even small escapes can cause considerable damage.

How often do we have major bushfires?

Because fire records in the past are not good, and records in the early days of European occupation are almost non-existent, a clear answer to this question is not easy.

However there were significant fires in Victoria, in 1905, 1906, 1912, 1914, 1919, 1926, 1932, 1939, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1952, 1962, 1965, 1968, 1969, 1972, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, and now 2009.

Since 2003, however, Victoria has had at least four uncommonly large fires which have been difficult or impossible to control, even with the huge resources available today.

What about climate change?

It is not possible to attribute the recent fires to climate change beyond question. However climate scientists have been saying for some time now that we should expect more frequent and more severe fires, like the recent ones, in coming years.