



VNPA response to the Final Report of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

Issue: Clearing of roadside vegetation

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) recognises the need to reduce bushfire risk on important access roads. We support a state-wide integrated ecological and fire risk assessment of all roadsides, including both VicRoads and Municipal roads. This should be funded and undertaken by the state, with input from local government and VicRoads.

The highest conservation values on roadsides are likely to be on those within the most fragmented or cleared landscapes. In some parts of Victoria roadsides have virtually the only native vegetation remaining in a wide area, and in many regions they form critical habitat links. In all landscapes, roadside vegetation often has significant social and commercial value as part of tourism and amenity values.

The VNPA believes that wildfire risk management planning could identify roads critical for evacuation, and any vegetation protection exemptions should be restricted to these roads. Any exemption should be based on avoiding vegetation removal where possible, or at least minimising vegetation losses, particularly where a roadside management plan identifies roadside areas with high conservation values.

Clearing controls on roadsides should not be 'one size fits all'. The VNPA suggests that roadside clearing controls should be developed with different rules for highly fragmented, relatively intact and highly forested areas, as follows:

1. In highly fragmented or 'most cleared' landscapes, priority should be given to retaining and restoring native vegetation. Where the integrated assessment identifies high-risk areas that pose a direct threat to human life, the possibility of establishing alternative escape routes should be explored.
2. In moderately cleared landscapes where roadsides contain high conservation value vegetation, strict retention and restoration controls should apply, but any high fire risks identified in detailed ecological and fire risk assessment should be addressed.
3. Intact landscapes or highly forested areas should have rules that provide for detailed assessment at a regional level, with exceptions applying only where the purpose is to reduce bushfire risk, and this is balanced with ecological and social values.



The Commission's key findings and recommendations

The Commission's final report highlights the need to reduce bushfire risk near roads, saying:

"In the case of bushfires, roads and roadsides can be important fuel breaks, so road managers need to reduce the fuel levels in preparation for the fire season. Roads are also essential for people seeking to escape fires and for emergency services seeking access to fires."

On the same page, they acknowledge that:

"In some cases these roadsides contain the only remnant native vegetation in an area and offer important wildlife corridors and shelter. Consequently, differing objectives for road safety, biodiversity protection and bushfire prevention can be difficult to reconcile."

On page 16 of the summary of the final report the Commission suggests:

"These concerns would be reduced if the State's planning provisions were amended to facilitate a broad range of roadside works to reduce bushfire risk, if municipal councils received better guidance to help them resolve competing environmental and bushfire management objectives, and if VicRoads implemented a systematic statewide assessment of bushfire risk for all roads."

In the main report of the Commission (Volume 2, page 312) it is reported that evidence presented to the Commission showed roadside vegetation to be *'largely inconsequential with fires of the intensity [of Black Saturday]'* and expert evidence questioned the capacity of roadside vegetation to act as a 'fuse' or 'wick'.

The Commission concludes:

"The evidence suggests that if conditions had been less severe on 7 February roadside vegetation is likely to have affected fire behaviour more significantly. For that reason the management of roadside vegetation to reduce fire intensity remains important. In particular, reduction of flame height (that is, by slashing or mowing grass) will be an important feature in reducing fire intensity and radiant heat, both of which assist suppression efforts."

The relevant recommendations of the Commission are:

RECOMMENDATION 60

The State amend the exemptions in clause 52.17-6 of the Victoria Planning Provisions to ensure that the provisions allow for a broad range of roadside works capable of reducing fire risk and provide specifically for a new exemption where the purpose of the works is to reduce bushfire risk.

RECOMMENDATION 61

The State and Commonwealth provide for municipal councils adequate guidance on resolving the competing tensions arising from the legislation affecting roadside clearing and, where necessary, amend environment protection legislation to facilitate annual bushfire-prevention activities by the appropriate agencies.



RECOMMENDATION 62

VicRoads implement a systematic statewide program of bushfire risk assessment for all roads for which it is responsible, to ensure conformity with the obligations in s. 43 of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 and with the objectives expressed in the VicRoads 1985 Code of Practice.

Other relevant recommendations include:

RECOMMENDATION 42

The Department of Sustainability and Environment develop and administer a collective offset solution for individual landholders who are permitted to remove native vegetation for the purpose of fire protection.

RECOMMENDATION 43

The Department of Sustainability and Environment conduct biodiversity mapping identifying flora, fauna and any threatened species throughout Victoria and make the results publicly available. The format used should be compatible with that used for Bushfire-prone Area mapping.

Background: ecological value of roadside vegetation – living links

Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia. Over half its native vegetation has been cleared for agriculture and urban development. In some parts of Victoria, over 80% of the original vegetation has been cleared. In some of the most fragmented or cleared areas of the State, roadsides make up a high proportion of remaining native vegetation and habitat.

The very recent (June 2010) and detailed Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) report on remnant native vegetation across the State highlights the ecological importance of roadsides: *“One of the key findings of this investigation has been the importance, by area, of native vegetation on road reserves in many Victorian landscapes – probably constituting around half the native vegetation in some areas. In this setting, native vegetation along road reserves is not just the connecting link between the important remnant habitat; it is the remaining habitat”.*

VEAC’s report includes a detailed assessment and evaluation of roadside vegetation. It notes that:

- There are approximately 570,000 ha of road reserves (used and unused) in Victoria
- There are approx. 120,000 ha of unused (undeveloped) road reserves
- There are approx. 450,000 ha of road reserves with roads in use
- About 245,000 ha (43%) of all road reserves (used and unused) have native vegetation on them
- Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, with over half its native vegetation cleared for agriculture and urban development. In some parts of the State, over 80% of the original vegetation has been cleared.
- Almost four out of five regions in Victoria have less than 40% of their original vegetation
- Habitat loss and the lack of vegetation are major causes of biodiversity loss and species decline in these landscapes.

In some of the most fragmented or cleared areas of the State, roadsides make up a high proportion of remaining native vegetation and habitat. In four bioregions road reserves account for more than 5% of total remnant native vegetation in fragmented landscapes: Murray Mallee (9.4%), Warrnambool Plain (6.8%), Wimmera (6.3%) and Victorian Riverina (5.7%).



Three bioregions have more than 15% of their fragmented public land native vegetation on roadsides – Victorian Riverina (27.8%), Wimmera (17.5%) and Dundas Tablelands (17.4%). All these bioregions are in the most cleared group.

As with several other measures, figures for roadside native vegetation in the Central Victorian Uplands, Northern Inland Slopes and Goldfields bioregions are comparable to those in the 'most cleared' group as much as they are to figures for their own 'moderately cleared' group (VEAC 2010 p 49)

VNPA response: summary

The VNPA recognises the need to reduce bushfire risk on important access roads. We support a state-wide integrated ecological and fire risk assessment of all roadsides, including both Vic Roads and municipal roads. This should be funded and undertaken by the State with input from local government and VicRoads.

In general terms the highest conservation values on roadsides are likely to be on roadsides in areas with the most fragmented or cleared landscapes. These landscapes are likely to have reduced fuel loads overall, due to a lack of vegetation across the broader landscape.

On the other hand, in extensively forested areas of the State, roadside vegetation may be of relatively lower conservation significance, and the need for fuel reduction may be greater. In all landscapes, roadside vegetation can have significant social and commercial value as part of tourism and amenity values.

For these reasons, changes to clearing controls on roadsides should not be 'one size fits all'. The regulatory response needs to take into account both ecological importance and fire safety aspects, informed by a state-wide integrated assessment. We suggest that roadside clearing controls be developed with different rules for highly fragmented, relative intact and highly forested areas, as follows:

- 1) In highly fragmented or 'most cleared' landscapes, priority should be given to retaining and restoring native vegetation. Where the integrated assessment identifies high-risk areas that pose a direct threat to human life, the possibility of establishing alternative escape routes should be explored.
- 2) In moderately cleared landscapes where roadsides contain high conservation value vegetation, strict retention and restoration controls should apply, but any high fire risks identified in detailed ecological and fire risk assessment should be addressed.
- 3) Intact landscapes or highly forested areas should have rules that provide for detailed assessment at a regional level, and exceptions only apply where the purpose of the works is to reduce bushfire risk and is balanced with ecological and social values.

In all areas, care must be taken to avoid perverse outcomes. In some circumstances additional tree or shrub removal may be needed along some priority escape roads, but in other places this could have unwanted effects, such as creating a wind tunnel. In heavily cleared landscapes, carefully planned roadside burning could be a win-win approach, whereas ploughing or clearing the vegetation could promote invasion by flammable exotic pasture grasses.