

Implications of the 2019-20 bushfires on future implementation of Victoria's RFAs

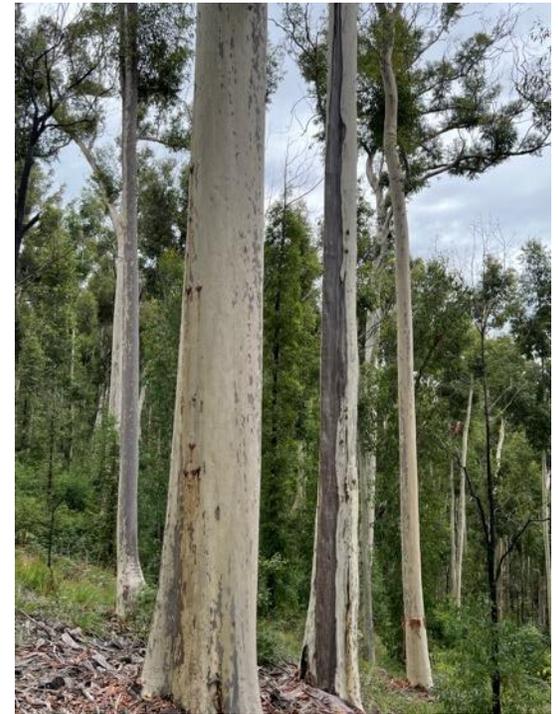
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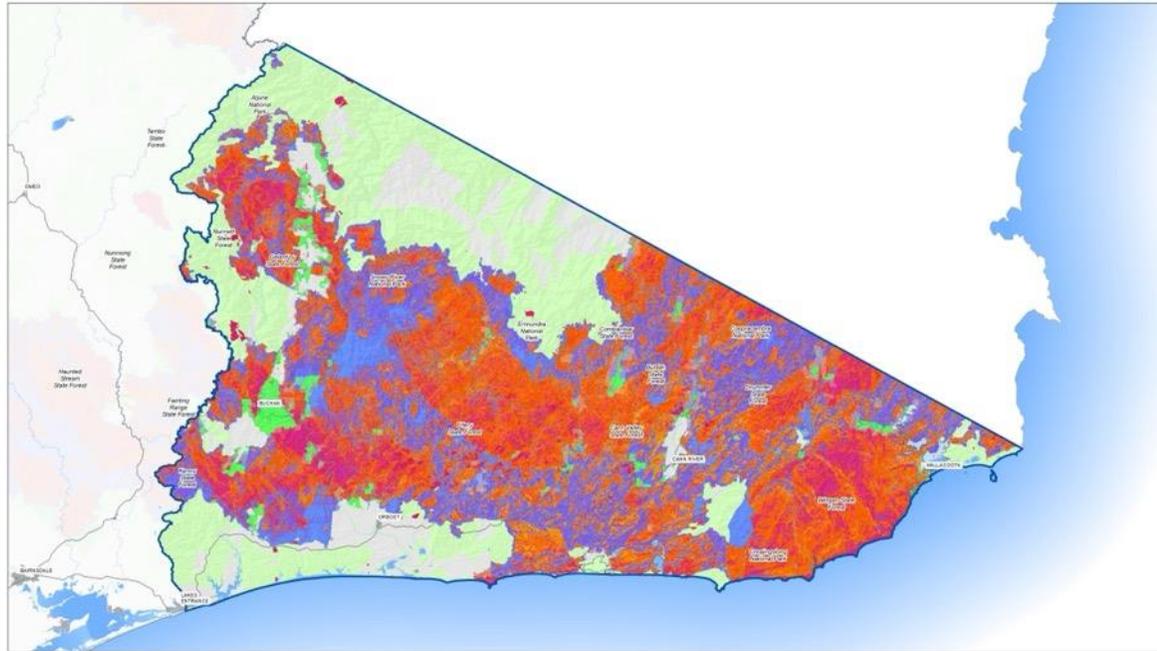
Outline of Presentation

- Acknowledgements:
 - MER panel members, 16 Traditional Owner groups, Stakeholders
- 2019-20 bushfires extent and impacts
- Major Event Review under modernised RFAs
- Some of the more significant bushfire impacts
- Key Findings and Recommendations
- Implications for Future Forest and Fire Management



East Gippsland RFA region – Fire Severity Map

Regional Forest Agreement Boundaries - EAST GIPPSLAND



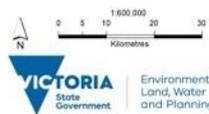
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Legend
RFA
Public Land Reserve
RFA

Fire Severity
Low
Medium
High
Very High



- RFA region = 1.21m ha - 1.05m ha public land
- Most extensive and severe most bushfires ever
- 815,419 ha burnt (67% of RFA area) – c.f. 253,000 ha in 1983
- 441,800 ha burnt at high severity (54%)
- 297,000 ha of dedicated reserves burnt, of which 163,000 ha burnt at high severity (46%)
- 378,000 ha of State Forest burnt, of which 212,000 ha (56%) burnt at high severity



Photo: James Neville-Smith

Scope of the Major Event Review

The Victorian RFAs, varied on 30 March 2020, included new provisions for conducting an independent Major Event Review (MER)

Assess the impacts of the 2019-20 bushfires on:

1. The operation of the RFAs
2. Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM)
3. The Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system
4. The effective management and protection of Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES)
5. Harvest level
6. The long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

- The Review will include public consultation and an assessment of the impacts on Environment and Heritage Values, Listed Species and Communities, Ecosystem Services and economic and social values.
- Consider all 5 Victorian RFAs and produce one consolidated report with recommended remedial actions



Major Event Review Process

- Conducted by a three-person independent Panel: Dr Gillian Sparkes, Dr Tony Bartlett, Ms Katherine Mullett
- Undertaken between Mar 21 and Mar 22 (13 months)
- Briefings by officials, academics, key stakeholders
- Online survey (79) and written submissions (134)
- 47 community & stakeholder meetings/discussions – very polarized views, 24 remedial actions proposed
- Extensive engagement with Traditional Owners (16 groups)
- Panel analysis of data, information and stakeholder views
- Preparation of independent Panel Report (300 pp + 123 pp appendices includes 37 recommendation)



<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/vic-rfa-mer-bushfires-report-2022.pdf>

Some of the significant impacts

- Overall 872,000 ha of CAR Reserves burnt (48% at high severity)
- Estimated loss of 62,000 ha of old growth (47% in East Gippsland)
- 15 listed threatened species + 1 community (warm temperate rainforest had more than 50% extent burnt)
- 5,179 ha (64%) of World Heritage Budj Bim Cultural Landscape in Western Victoria RFA region was burnt, but stone aquaculture structures undamaged
- 144 historic heritage sites impacted by high severity fire, 1,183 registered aboriginal heritage sites in fire area (status mostly unknown)
- Native forest log supplies declined by 13-14% in 2019-20
- 8,350 ha (\$75 million) of plantations destroyed (long-term impacts)
- 305 apiary sites impacted (impacts on floral resources last 10-25 years)
- \$25m recreation assets lost, \$260m in tourism visitor losses



Photo: Katherine Mullett

Traditional Owner Perspectives

Extensive engagement process – 54pp report

Traditional Owners had 9 concerns in relation to RFAs:

Engagement processes	
Aboriginal cultural heritage management	Implementation of Traditional Owner clauses
Economic impacts	Cultural burning
Access to Country	Current condition of Country
Healing of Country and culture	Timber harvesting



Photo: Katherine Mullett

Destruction of country caused immense grief to Aboriginal communities due to their cultural obligation to care for Country, the extent of the damage to forests and the loss or damage to tangible and intangible cultural heritage

MER Recommendations:

- Need to improve system for considering all Aboriginal cultural heritage during fire suppression operations
- Need greater participation of Traditional Owners before, during and after bushfires (decisions about heritage sites, healing communities and Healing of Country)
- Need holistic year-round management of Country & adequate resourcing of all TO groups
- Need assessments of cultural sites, TO RFA implementation plans, revitalize National Indigenous Forest Strategy

Comprehensive, Adequate & Representative (CAR) Reserve System

- CAR Reserve System has 4 components: Dedicated Reserves, Special Protection Zones (no logging), and Special Management and General Management Zones (values covered by prescriptions)
- 872,565 ha of CAR Reserves within fire extent – 53% in East Gippsland
- CAR Reserves are main mechanism for protecting listed species and communities (FFG Act or EPBC Act)
- No. of listed species/communities impacted in a RFA region varied (21-38), with 7 species and on community having > 50% of extent burnt at high severity
- Seven vulnerable or endangered EVCs had 50% of extent burnt
- In East Gippsland RFA region, 89% of warm temperate rainforest extent in CAR Reserves burnt, with 43% burnt at high severity



Old Growth Forests

- Old Growth forests were one of the key environment and heritage values identified and protected via RFA process, with 60% (+) to be protected within CAR Reserve System
- MER modelling found about 62,000 ha (15%) of Victoria's old growth lost in 19-20 fires, of which 40,800 ha was within Dedicated Reserves and Special Protection Zones (two components of CAR Reserves)
- In East Gippsland, many Old Growth Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) lost 30-50% of extent in these bushfires
- About 60% of Victoria's Old Growth forests identified by the 1990s RFA processes has been lost from severe bushfires since 2000. (840,000 ha reduced to 344,000 ha) (equivalent to losing area of forest 4 X size of Wilson's Prom)



Photo: Ian Christie



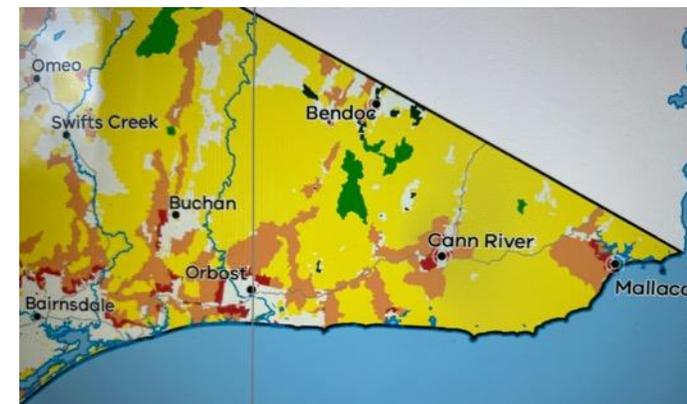
Photo: DELWP

Need for integrated forest and fire management

- At landscape level, land tenure had little impact on fire severity:
 - Dedicated Reserves = 32% of fire extent & 34% of area burnt at high severity
 - State Forest = 43% of fire extent & 45% of area burnt at high severity
- Victoria's public land management planning not well integrated, with most management plans 25-30 years old and poorly connected with recent bushfire management strategies, especially for protection of environmental values.
- Current forest and fire management strategies are ineffective in limiting bushfire impacts on many important RFA values, including old growth, threatened species and fire sensitive communities
- Improvements are required to more seamlessly align management zoning systems with strategies to better protect important forest values as well as life and property.



Photos: Ian Christie



Examples of MER Recommendations – relevant to fire management

Rec 25: Improve integration of zoning systems in forest management plans, national park management plans and bushfire management strategies.

Rec 34: Expand an active and adaptive management approach to scale up the implementation of ecological burning in public forests.

Rec 32: Enhance support for implementation of TO Cultural Fire Strategy and empower and resource TOs to reintroduce cultural burning.

Recs 14-15: Better integrate forest industry brigades in bushfire suppression, identify options for reducing external bushfire risks to plantations and model bushfire impacts on future wood flows.

Rec 29: Commit to a comprehensive, long-term research program on impacts of short-interval severe bushfires on long-term stability of forests.



Implications for future forest and fire management (1)

- Forest stability is being compromised by bushfires in many forest types, including ash forests, mixed species forests and rainforests
- Observable increases in frequency of major bushfires and proportion of native forest being burnt at high intensity
- Treats to threatened species from changed fire regimes comes almost entirely from impacts of severe bushfires c.f. prescribed burning
- Old Growth forests and fire-sensitive forests will be lost if the extent of severe bushfires are not reduced



Implications for future forest and fire management (2)

- Victoria's forest management system components (legislation, policies, plans) collectively are not limiting the significant impacts of major bushfires on many forest values
- Current forest and fire management strategies are not working and not achieving purposes of RFAs, e.g. conserving CAR Reserve values or providing for long term stability of forests and forest industries
- Traditional Owners felt a personal hurt at seeing Country burnt so severely and need to have a greater voice in future forest and fire management strategies
- Strategy to source all timber products from private plantations will fail if plantations can not be better protected from bushfires



Modernised RFAs could provide a way forward

- Victoria's **modernised RFAs contain many important new clauses** including:
- **Engaging with stakeholders and local communities** to enable meaningful participation in decision making processes
- Provide for **the conservation and recovery of Listed Species and Communities**, based on best available science and active management of native forests in order to build their resilience and diversity
- Ensure that **Traditional Owners are empowered** to have an active role in the management of forests on public land on Country
- **Supporting the expansion of a range of Forest Industries** to drive jobs and economic benefits to rural and regional communities
- Need for **active management to reduce bushfire risk and support the recovery of forests and communities** dependent on them after bushfire

Victoria needs to provide appropriate resources to implement the intent of the RFAs to provide for the full range of uses and values in a balanced holistic way, with a major overhaul of current management strategies



Questions

