

Smoke from Sustainable Timber Tasmania planned burning risks tainting wine and beer, growers say

[ABC Rural](#)

By [Fiona Breen](#) and [Tony Briscoe](#)
12/3/2021 Posted 7hours ago



Smoke from a regeneration burn hanging over a crop in Tasmania's Derwent Valley. *ABC News: Luke Bowden*

Share

Wine and beer producers north of Hobart are pleading with authorities to stop planned forestry burns they say threaten their livelihoods — or do better in communicating that they are about to take place.

Key points:

- Autumn is the season for planned burns in Tasmania's forest areas
- Smoke from planned burn operations is in danger of affecting crop production, growers say
- One craft beer maker said clients at his brewery fled due to the amount of smoke

The complaints came after smoke from a planned regeneration burn in the Styx Valley, about two hours north-west of Hobart on Saturday, drifted over crops when the fire became out of control.

The state-owned forestry enterprise Sustainable Timber Tasmania said "gusty wind conditions" resulted in the fire escaping containment lines.

The fire is north-west of several vineyards — including Gerald Ellis's Meadowbank Vineyard — and as of Thursday had burnt across over 130 hectares, with multiple aircraft involved in the firefighting effort.



Smoke from a planned burn rises into the sky near Maydena.

Supplied

Mr Ellis has 50 hectares under vines and is watching the smoke haze nervously, concerned that winds will bring it close to the vineyards.

"We're on the edge of the smoke and so it all depends on what happens over the next 24 hours, if it is controlled we'll be fine, if it burns for the next three days we'll be in trouble," he said.

The vineyard owner has emailed Primary Industries Minister Guy Barnett to ask that all resources possible be thrown at the fire.

"Obviously our fruit, if we have smoke, sitting in the valley for three or four days it can cause potential smoke taint, in which case we'd have to reject our whole crop," Mr Ellis said.

Peter Dredge is a winemaker in the same region and one of a number of producers who say the planned burns should not happen when crops are set to be harvested.

"For one of these burns to be happening ... to have smoke flying around is pretty stressful," he said.

Mr Dredge said following the 2019 bushfires, "we're very aware of it in the Derwent Valley", adding producers in the Huon Valley, south of Hobart, were keenly aware after they "lost product [to bushfire smoke taint]".

What is a regeneration burn?

- Typically performed in autumn, regeneration burns are planned operations at the site of recently harvested native forests
- Tasmania's state-owned forestry enterprise says the burning operations mimic the "major disturbance" of natural fires, leading to new growth
- The fires "increase sunlight reaching the forest floor ... initiate seed-fall, and reduce the local number of insect and mammal browsers", the company says

Mr Dredge said more should be done to notify producers of planned burns.

"When these controlled situations happen, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of communication going on," he said.

On its website, Sustainable Timber Tasmania states it "notifies and engages with all immediate neighbours throughout the Planned Burning Program planning stage, prior to any burning".

"This includes notifications to stakeholders who have registered their interest in particular planned burns and through agreed protocols with tourism and wine industries.

"We advise the public through daily media and Facebook notifications. We also publish our Planned Burning Program and daily information uploads to the What's Burning Now? page at www.fire.tas.gov.au."



Planned burn-offs are a regular occurrence in Tasmania in autumn.

Supplied: Beth Heap

Mr Dredge is adamant the burns should not be happening at all.

"This time of year it's inexcusable. Smoke can impede the quality of grapes, particularly after they're fermented. I'm going to have to go down a series of protocols to test early grapes to see if we are at any risk of taint."

Ashley Huntington has a craft beer brewery in the region and said, "five of the last six days we've been covered by smoke".

He said visitors to his brewery fled the premises on the weekend when smoke closed in.

"On Saturday, my entire clientele left, we had visibility down to a kilometre. People had been sitting down enjoying a spectacular day.

"We called triple-0 because I hadn't seen smoke like this since January 2019.

"They said that was a controlled burn at Maydena at which I lost my shit ... we were at our brewery being smoked out."



Sustainable Timber Tasmania fire-fighters working at a fire site.
Sustainable Timber Tasmania

The brewer is also calling on Sustainable Timbers Tasmania to rethink its burning program.

"I don't think it should happen in early March, full stop, it's dangerous.

"If they have to do it could they wait until harvest is over and tourists numbers are down a bit."

He added he would like to see better communication to those affected.

"They posted on their websites I think, we are really only aware when they light them up."

Farmer Charles Downie has a 20-hectare vineyard about 2 kilometres south of Meadowbank as the crow flies.

[ABC News homepage](#)

He said he could smell smoke around his vineyard over the weekend. Today, his wife alerted him to the fact that a controlled burn had leapt containment lines.

"Personally, I would prefer there weren't any forestry burns in March or April, however I do appreciate from their perspective it's the best time to burn.

"I just hope they are deploying extra people and more machinery to make sure it's contained and put out."

Mr Downie said he would be "really nervous if we get a south-easterly and no wind for a couple of days".

"I'm completely powerless to stop the smoke, it's in Sustainable Timber's hands."



Bushfires burnt across huge areas of Tasmania in 2019.

ABC News

In a statement, Sustainable Timber Tasmania said it was "currently managing a fire in the Styx Valley".

"The fire originated from a planned regeneration burn conducted on Saturday that crossed containment lines on Wednesday due to gusty wind conditions onsite.

"Prior to yesterday [Wednesday], monitoring of the planned burn had confirmed that the original containment lines had been effective.

"The current fire size is 130 hectares. A smoke alert has been issued around New Norfolk, Bushy Park, Westerway and Gretna as there may be visible smoke and ash from this fire."

Sustainable Timber Tasmania said, "fire crews, heavy plant and helicopters are onsite to establish and restrict the fire to new containment lines".

"An operational review will be undertaken by Sustainable Timber Tasmania to understand and learn from the burn."

Posted 7hours ago

Share

Related Stories

[This cherry juice was too smoky to be cider, so it might be used in brandy instead](#)



[Bushfire response found wanting, as report details lapses in tactics during summer blazes](#)



[Perverse beauty of Tasmanian bushfires captured in 'striking, horrible' images](#)



More on:

- [MAYDENA](#)
- [HOBART](#)
- [FIRES](#)
- [FIRE SERVICE](#)
- [FORESTRY](#)
- [AGRICULTURAL CROPS](#)
- [CONSERVATION](#)