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Bushfire prevention strategy questioned after Lancefield

After the Lancefield fires, caused by a planned burn, the Victorian government has backed away from Black Saturday royal commission recommendations. But communities remain mistrustful of new strategies.



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Last November, the secretary of Victoria's environment department, Adam Fennessy, stood before a furious and tearful congregation. He was facing the residents of Lancefield, a regional town north of Melbourne, which had been devastated by fires when a planned burn escaped its containment lines two months earlier. Four homes were lost. "I am very sorry, I am deeply sorry for the distress this fire has caused you," Fennessy told them. "And the disruption and the enormous impacts it's had on your lives."

Fennessy had the difficult job of publicly accepting the findings of an independent report, which found that the burn was hopelessly under-resourced and "poorly planned".

In north-east Victoria, in the Strathbogie Ranges, a community group has formed – the Strathbogie Sustainable Forests Group. Their spokesman, ecologist Bertram Lobert, tells me the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning had conducted a failed burn there in March 2015. "They did a 500-hectare burn at the end of summer. The local farmers thought it was too hot. And it went wrong, but they don't accept that publicly. We asked them what kind of monitoring they did, and they showed us some maps and that was about it. So we conducted our own technical report of the impact. It was shocking. A relatively small burn had killed half of all trees that measured more than a metre in diameter. These trees are 100 to 200 years old. They're ecological cornerstones. These burns shouldn't have that kind of impact."

I read Lobert's report, with photographs of charred koala corpses, and asked the department about the Strathbogie burn. They replied: "There was considerable preparation undertaken before the burn, including providing protection to a number of larger trees close to the boundary of the area. The burn was lit over several days to ensure the fire intensity was maintained within prescribed limits."

"It was impossible to have a rational discussion at that time."

"We believe the burn was very successful in achieving the objective of reducing fuel levels and bushfire risk to the community and environment. While any fire in the landscape will have an effect on larger trees, a planned burn will have much less impact than a bushfire, primarily due to the lower fire intensity. Further burns are planned in the Strathbogie Ranges to reduce the risk from bushfires this autumn."

The Lancefield fires led to the abandonment of one of the Victoria Bushfires Royal Commission's recommendations, delivered a year after the catastrophic Black Saturday fires of 2009, which mandated a significant increase in prescribed burns – to 5 per cent of all public lands. After the Lancefield report, the Victorian government announced its strategic shift. "Previously, planned burns were driven by a hectare target. Going forward, Victoria will become more sophisticated in the way we manage planned burning."

There had already been warnings that the hectare-based approach was wrong. In 2013, the body charged with overseeing the implementation of the royal commission's recommendations, wrote this in its annual report: "The Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor advocated that the planned burning program be strategically focused on addressing high bushfire risk areas rather than on meeting the annual rolling target of 5 per cent minimum."

While Lobert believes that the Lancefield fires gave the department "cover" to dismiss the wrongheaded hectare-based target, problems remain and are exacerbated by the department being "starved" of funds. "They lost a third of staff under [former Liberal premier Denis] Napthine," Lobert tells me. "And they rely upon economies of scale. Frankly, we got jack of the rhetoric, state or federal. 'Using fire to build forest resilience'

– it was all pissing in the wind.”

Extreme reaction

Largely ignored over the years, the politics of fire control have been both intense and fluctuating.

Black Saturday, February 7, 2009, was Australia’s worst fire event. One-hundred-and-seventy-three people were killed, hundreds more injured. The fires destroyed almost half a million square hectares. Over the course of the event, the Country Fire Authority and environment department battled 316 grass, scrub or forest fires.

In the fires’ wake, the royal commission’s report made 67 recommendations, covering everything from building codes, land management, warning systems and communications protocols for emergency services.

But for some, the culprit was obvious – environmentalists. Writing from Sydney, Miranda Devine penned a venomous column while Victoria’s towns were still smouldering and bodies being discovered. “It wasn’t climate change which killed as many as 300 people in Victoria last weekend,” she wrote. “It wasn’t arsonists. It was the unstoppable intensity of a bushfire, turbo-charged by huge quantities of ground fuel which had been allowed to accumulate over years of drought. It was the power of Green ideology over government to oppose attempts to reduce fuel hazards before a mega-fire erupts.”

Devine went on: “The warnings have been there for a decade. If politicians are intent on whipping up a lynch mob to divert attention from their own culpability, it is not arsonists who should be hanging from lamp-posts but greenies.”

This wasn’t mere political theatre. Devine was echoing sentiments that simmered in Victoria’s regional communities. In the weeks following Black Saturday, graffiti began appearing on the walls of homes and businesses. “Shoot greenies,” it read. There were threats of lynching. “I remember it well,” Bertram Lobert tells me. “There was a terrible backlash. Lots of graffiti. Lots of anger. People were fearful.”

By “fearful”, Lobert isn’t merely referring to the threat of retaliation, but also of future fires. Black Saturday was the result of a combination of factors, and its aftermath created its own complicated storms of resentment. Devine was articulating an anger that appeared utterly reasonable – that environmentalists cared more for wattle and honeyeaters than they did for human lives. They were pretentiously detached from common sense, and common care. But in the years since Black Saturday, Devine’s argument has increasingly appeared as a straw man, a convenient outlet for the discharge of fear, anger and sadness. The argument about prescribed burning was always more complicated – not whether it should ever be used, but how best to use it.

Royal Commission plan questioned

In the royal commission’s final report, tabled in 2010, recommendation 56 spoke to the management of ground fuel. The commission felt that prescribed burns were well below the number they should be. It noted that the then Department of Sustainability and Environment “burns only 1.7 per cent of public land a year. This is well below the amount experts and previous inquiries have suggested is needed to reduce bushfire and environmental risks in the long term ... It is concerned that the state has maintained a minimalist approach to prescribed burning despite recent official or independent reports.

“The commission proposes that the state make a commitment to fund a long-term program of burning, with an annual rolling target of a minimum of 5 per cent of public land each year.”

And there’s the rub. The commission’s proposal was not for a risk-based strategy of burning, but a blunter, hectare-based mandate. Opponents to the recommendation were not opponents of planned burning, but of an approach that failed to discern risk.

“It was impossible to have a rational discussion at that time,” Michael Spencer told me. He is the president of the Strathbogie Sustainable Forest Group, and remembers Black Saturday well. “And that was completely understandable, really. People were badly affected.”

Like Lobert, Spencer is not opposed to prescribed burns. But both men have little faith in the sophistication of future Strathbogie burns. “Preventive burns have their place,” Spencer says, “but it has to be thought through carefully.”

In March last year, three researchers from the University of Melbourne published a paper in the academic journal *Ecological Applications*. Far from denying the usefulness of prescribed burns, the researchers accepted that in some areas the practice can reduce a future bushfire’s “spread rate and intensity”. But they wrote that the 5 per cent policy was overwhelmingly blunt – that it reduced biodiversity, ignored ecological variables throughout the state, and was inefficient. “Research completed after the Black Saturday fires showed that the most effective way to protect houses is through burning (or clearing) vegetation in close proximity to houses. Burning in more remote areas has little impact on reducing risk.”

But burning in remote areas was what was increasingly happening under the new guidelines. Bertram Lobert said this was the perverse outcome of having a quantitative – rather than qualitative – goal. That is, burning an arbitrary amount of bush rather than a specified area. “The areas that really need mitigation,” Lobert tells me, “are the places that are hardest to do – places around homes. Look at the Dandenong Ranges. So when you have this 5 per cent target you end up having large, isolated blocks targeted because it’s much easier to reach that target.”

The department of environment described to me the government’s retreat from the royal commission’s recommendation for increased planned burns to meet that target: “Even though we previously used risk to guide our actions, under a hectare target we needed to burn a set number of hectares each year. Moving forward our new approach to bushfire management will combine stronger community partnerships with the latest science and information to more effectively target our actions to reduce our bushfire risk.”

Lobert isn’t convinced. “The royal commission placed great emphasis upon the monitoring of controlled burns. But they’re not really doing this. There’s no protocol. They don’t know what they’re losing.”

Planned burns orthodoxy

At issue here is the fact that the conventional wisdom of firefighters may be flawed. Preventive burning is seen wholly as a virtue, but its efficacy may be overstated. Last year, Associate Professor Geoff Cary – who specialises in bushfire science at the Australian National University – wrote: “There is evidence that hazard reduction burning helps limit the spread of bushfires that burn in moderate weather, but has less effect on bushfires burning during extreme and catastrophic conditions. Yet most houses are destroyed during bushfires burning in extreme and catastrophic fire weather. For example, the small town of Marysville in Victoria was devastated on Black Saturday, despite a ring of previous hazard-reduction burning.”

“Platitudes are memorable,” Lobert tells me. “Like, ‘fight fire with fire’. That’s their power, I guess, and in their repetition they become truisms.”

TAGS:

Adam Fennessy Lancefield Michael Spencer Strathbogie Sustainable Forests Group Bertram Lobert Department of Environment Land Water and Planning
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