

WEEKLY TIMES

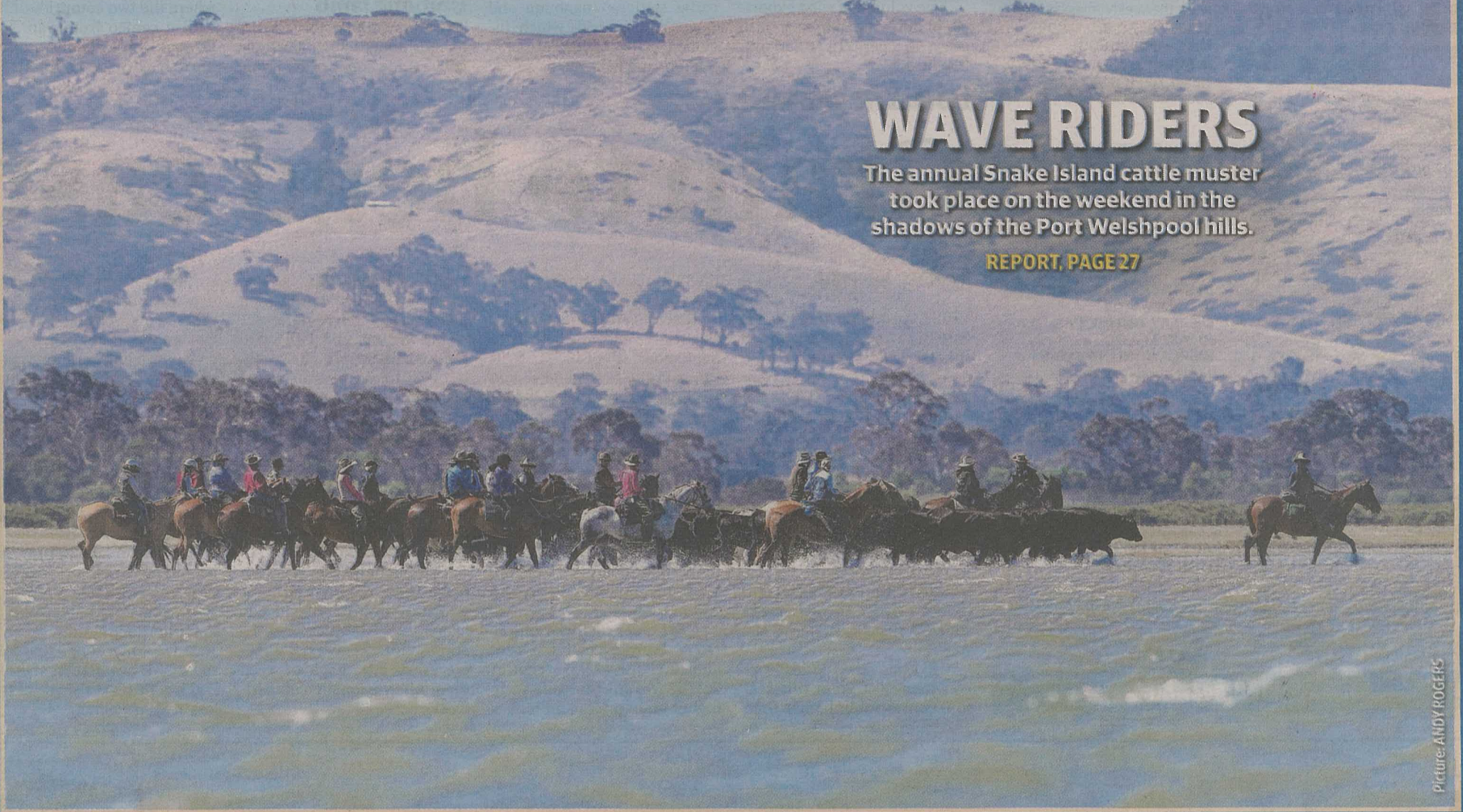


THE VOICE OF THE COUNTRY SINCE 1869

WAVE RIDERS

The annual Snake Island cattle muster took place on the weekend in the shadows of the Port Welshpool hills.

REPORT, PAGE 27



Picture: ANDY ROGERS

10 years since Black Saturday and little progress on making powerlines safe

FIRE WIRE FAILURE

By PETER HUNT

A DECADE on from Black Saturday, 83 per cent of Victoria's most dangerous powerlines stand ready to spark yet another catastrophic bushfire.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission recommended all single earth wire return and 22kV lines within "areas of highest bushfire risk" across Victoria's powerline network should be covered, bundled

or put underground within 10 years. The commission's call was based on the conclusion that 159 of Black Saturday's 173 victims died in fires caused by powerlines.

But figures supplied by network owners — AusNet and Powercor — show they have covered, bundled or buried just 606km of the 3557km of bare-wire lines that sit within the state's 33 extreme risk zones.

Bushfire scientist Kevin Tolhurst's

phoenix Rapidfire model identified that bare wire powerlines posed a devastating risk to lives and properties at Swifts Creek, Seymour, Broadford, Kilmore, Warrandyte, Jamieson, Hepburn, Gellibrand, Creswick, as well as the Dandenong, Yarra and Colac-Otway ranges and another 33 extreme risk zones.

AusNet Services reported last April it had replaced just 265km of its 1728km of powerlines in extreme risk

(codified) zones, since 2012-13, across the eastern half of Victoria.

Powercor had replaced just 342km of its 1829km of bare wires in western Victoria's extreme zones by April 2018.

And neither company intends to speed up the process, with AusNet reporting it would replace and protect another 39km of bare wires in the 12 months to April this year, while Powercor aimed to replace 62km.

An AusNet spokeswoman said

"a faster replacement program was considered". "(But) after public consultation, the Government chose replacement at end of asset life as delivering the most cost effective risk reduction for customers".

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• Rule's View, Page 15

ANIMAL ACTIVISTS
FARM MAP
FURY

P3



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HONDA WORK RANGE HONDA

23/1/19

RURAL BURDEN

Powerline safety bills pain

By PETER HUNT

COUNTRY Victorians are paying \$500 million for powerline upgrades they say are doing little to improve their safety, but are pushing up their power bills.

In 2016 the Government drafted regulations allowing Powercor and AusNet to pass the \$500 million cost of upgrading powerlines in the state's high-risk bushfire zones on to their regional customers.

Terang dairy farmer Jill Porter, who lost fencing, fodder and 300 dairy cows in last year's St Patrick's Day fires, said regional Victorians resented having to pay the full cost of powerline upgrades, which were of little value, while the Government spent billions on Melbourne.

"The State Government is investing over \$6 billion (now revised to \$8.3 billion) on rail crossings in Melbourne, while country Victorians continue to live with the ever growing fear of fire from ageing and failing electrical infrastruc-



Ignition point: Jill Porter near powerlines at Terang, where she runs a dairy farm with her husband. The couple's farm was the first to be burnt out during last year's St Patrick's Day fires that spread though out the southwest of Victoria. Picture: ANDY ROGERS

ture," Ms Porter said. "The cost to the entire community from such fires is enormous, Black Saturday cost between \$4-7 billion and we lost the lives of too many (173) people."

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

called on the Government to fund at least half the cost of powerline upgrades, but to date the Government has put just \$250 million of its own money on the table.

Counsel assisting the 2009 Royal Commission Jack Rush, who lives in Molyullah,

said it was only fair that all Victorians contributed to the cost of upgrading powerlines.

"The entire state benefits because it reduces the risk of another Black Saturday," he said.

But questions have been raised over the benefits of the

current \$500 million in upgrades to automatic circuit reclosers that can be remotely disabled on total fire ban days, as well as rapid earth current limiters at substations.

Ms Porter said the ACR proved useless during the St Patrick's Day fires, which she

said failed to stop a fallen line sparking the Garvoc fire.

She urged the Government to cover (insulate) powerlines instead.

Attentis Technology consultants have also warned: "We do not believe that REFCL or ACR can deliver the intended objectives without complementary technology to confirm, or otherwise, a fire start."

"There is the real possibility that this approach could make situations more hazardous."

Analysis by Victorian Energy Policy Centre director Bruce Mountain showed regional Victorians pay higher network costs than Melbourne, with residential customers using 4800kWh a year in AusNet's distribution zone paying annual network charges of \$592, compared with Citipower customers (\$393) or those with United Energy in Melbourne (\$436). Powercor's network pricing for the same customers is \$470.

● **Poles apart on fire fear,** Page 14

10 years on and lines still prove a risk

• From Page 1

Industry sources also pointed to a loophole in the Victorian Government's bushfire mitigation regulations, which they said slowed the rollout.

Victoria's Electricity Safety (Bushfire Mitigation) Amendment Regulations 2016 state that AusNet or Powercor only need to "wholly or substantially replace" any powerline within one of the 33 extreme risk zones, if they are working on "at least four consecutive spans".

In August last year AusNet released a tender to upgrade the Seymour to Yea powerline, part of which passes through an extreme (codified area) zone.

The tender states: "The 22kV subsidiary assets from pole 4704198 to pole 4704411 are within a codified area and "any conductor replacement has to be limited to 4 spans in this area or a HV ABC (insulated high voltage aerial bundled cable) solution must be implemented."

An AusNet spokeswoman said there was no basis to any claim that the tender document was an attempt to avoid powerline replacement works.

"It's not practical to insulate lines every time you touch a single span as it would introduce big delays in restoring power after faults and storms," she said. "The four-

HAVE YOUR SAY

Should the Government replace risky powerlines?

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spans rule strikes a good balance."

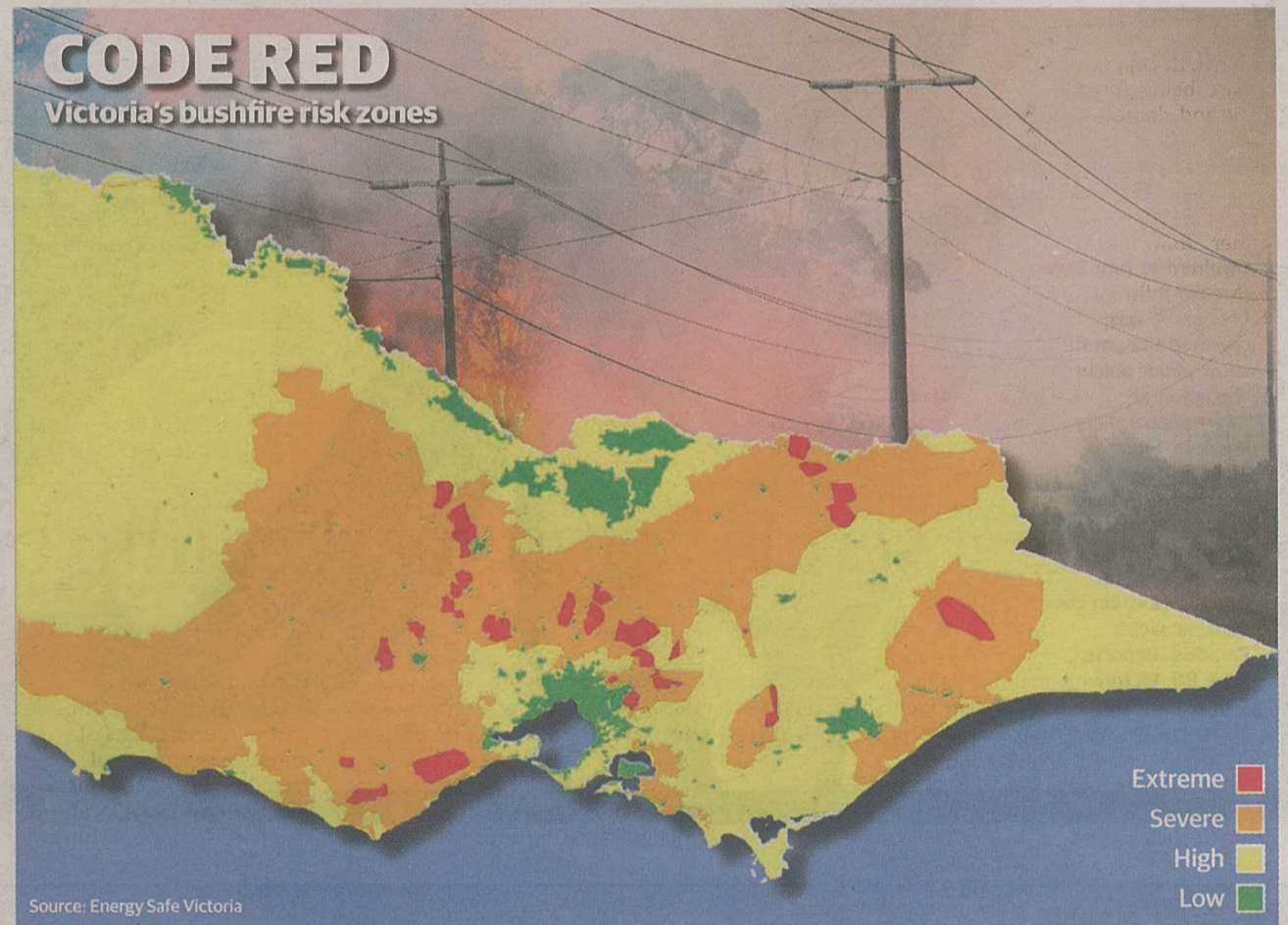
Industry sources say the blame for failing to do more can be sheeted home to weak government regulation and an even weaker regulator — Energy Safe Victoria.

A spokeswoman for Energy Minister Lily D'Ambrosio refused to answer questions on the loophole, simply stating: "We're taking action to reduce the risk of bushfires and protect communities across Victoria."

But even the Government-commissioned Grimes Review into electricity and gas network safety called on ESV to show greater independence and effort in enforcement.

The final Grimes report, released last August, stated ESV had "sometimes been perceived as having a reluctance to adopt more strict enforcement methods for energy network businesses" and the "movement of staff between regulated businesses, consultancies and the regulator (ESV) creates risks of perceived or actual conflicts of interest".

The 2009 Royal Commission expressed concerns that ESV's "focus is on ticking



Source: Energy Safe Victoria

POWERLINE FIRES

Source: Energy Safe Victoria

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Fires due to contact	79	54	108	114	101	98	105	95	117
Fires due to asset failures	60	61	123	239	177	148	98	105	88
Total	139	115	231	353	278	246	203	200	205

boxes rather than substantive matters".

Powercor electricity networks general manager Steven Neave said: "We are confident we will fully deliver the royal commission recommendations related to our business within the regulated timelines".

ESV's own data shows

powerlines continue to spark about 200 fires each year, with the number dropping to close to 100 in wet years and surging to 300 or more during dry, windy summers.

The royal commission highlighted Victoria has a history of electricity assets causing bushfires in 1969, 1977 and 1983, due to clashing of con-

ductors, conductors contacting trees, and inefficient fuses.

In investigating the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, inquiry chairman Sir Esler Barber found four of the eight major fires that day were caused by electricity assets.

In his final report Sir Esler warned powerline fires "tend to occur in widely separated

places at about the same time and at the time of day when conditions are such that the rate of spread of fire is likely to be at its peak".

On Black Saturday electricity assets caused six of the 11 major fires — Kilmore East, Murrindindi, Beechworth, Coleraine, Horsham and Pomborneit — Weerite.

Letters

Have your say at theweeklytimes.com.au

Break banks of political complacency

THE New Year always brings the promise of an autumn break, and hopefully this year a break from the political status quo.

With two upcoming political elections it is time for us to evaluate the performance of the NSW State and Federal governments. Have they done a good job? Has our money been well spent? Have the lives of voters across NSW improved? Are our natural assets in good hands? Are we proud of their achievements?

Unbelievably, after telling us it would never happen, our governments committed to holding course on water management despite fish and bird kills in the Darling, starving kangaroos and brumbies marooned in flood water and blue-green algae blooms in our rivers and lakes posing serious risks to everyone's health.

The MDBA and the NSW State Government have not learnt that rapidly draining water reserves in the Menindee Lakes will place big risks on the people and wildlife along the Darling. Drying other creeks will cause fish and bird kills and place the livelihoods of many at jeopardy. Artificially flooding areas kills plants and animals, damages river banks and breeds carp.

The best NSW water minister Niall Blair can offer is to re-



locate the MDBA to an irrigation area in regional NSW. That's just like shifting deck chairs on the Titanic.

It is time for a national conversation about whether we are prepared to continue spending billions of dollars and sacrifice inland NSW environments to save the Coorong, which has been in decline and poorly managed by SA since the 1880s.

Our Governments are abandoning our recreational sites, our natural inland assets and our health for city centric politics. It is time to send a clear message to stop taking rural Australia for granted.

Helen Dalton Griffith

MDBA reeks of corruption

THE stench of a million dead fish is the stench of the corruption of the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

Congratulations must go to the federal and state politicians complicit in this outrage. Just

as huge agricultural corporations have stolen the headwaters of our great rivers by diverting the catchment to their private dams, the theft of the catchments and the headwaters of our southern mountains and forests in the Victorian Central Highlands by clear-fell logging continues unabated as we speak. Clear-fell logging in the catchments reduces flows by 30 per cent.

The pathway to the death of our great rivers and millions of fish begins in the catchment.

One step at a time we march towards the inevitable outcome that shocks and dismays us all. Capture of the catchment by profit-hungry corporations leaves communities and nature bereft of a rightful asset.

Rod Falconer Snobs Creek

Wetlands need protection too

IT IS interesting that every year when duck season is an-

nounced the people who are against the season come out of the wood work.

Science shows that hunters have no impact on the waterfowl population, but the greatest contributor to a declining waterfowl population is loss of habitat.

For 50-plus years hunting and conservation groups have lobbied governments to improve habitat to no avail.

There are hundreds of wetlands throughout Victoria that could receive environmental flows or natural flow yet through development and regulatory changes very few can actually receive any form of flooding.

Surely we have a responsibility to put infrastructure in place to reinvigorate wetlands and put some form of flooding regimen back in place to stop the degradation that has occurred for decades.

Restoration, not degradation.

Brendan Sullivan Talbot

Get regional areas off and racing

WAYS to grow regional Victoria should be a priority.

The plan to relocate the Caulfield racehorse training facility should have Wangaratta on the cards. Wangaratta fits the bill perfectly with its proximity to the Hume Highway — ideal for moving horses north and south to race in Melbourne or Sydney and the many tracks on both sides of the border.

The current plans to move to outer Melbourne locations such as Pakenham and Cranbourne show a State Government that is not looking at ways to grow regional Victoria.

The Wangaratta regions could become a great horse racing, breeding and pre training area. It is an industry that could boost a region in many ways. The outer suburbs plan is a short-term option as the city will force another change of location.

Stuart Davie Corowa, NSW

PIECE OF MIND

letters@theweeklytimes.com.au

THIS is so very wrong, ("Fund a thief", theweeklytimes.com.au Jan 16).

I'm all for people having the choice to eat meat or to not, but don't attack others and their livelihoods because they don't share your views.

Stealing animals is not humane, it's stressful for them and harmful to their health.

The exact opposite to caring for them.

Kimmi

THEIR criminal behaviour seems to be enabled by the police and the courts, ("Funding illegal activity not OK", theweeklytimes.com.au Jan 18). They're certainly not being prevented or even discouraged by the current legal system.

Michael

FEED costs are really rising, ("Feed pressures rising", theweeklytimes.com.au Jan 16).

Fuel costs. Power costs. Living costs.

Everything going up except the price we get paid for milk. How long until it changes?

Jay

YOU can't keep squeezing a lemon and expect to get juice, ("End blame game on fish kill", theweeklytimes.com.au Jan 16).

The whole river system is an ecological mess.

This river system was not designed to support irrigation of this modern era.

Drew

WHY do we need to import?, ("African Swine Fever detected", theweeklytimes.com.au, Jan 18).

If we supported the Australian pig industry, we would not face this challenge.

Maureen

POLL RESULTS

FUND A THIEF

Should those funding crimes against farmers be prosecuted?

Yes **96%**
No **4%**

1199 votes to noon yesterday

THIS WEEK

Should the activists' farm map be allowed?

theweeklytimes.com.au

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



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