

# WEEKLY TIMES



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## ON TRACK

Agriculture teacher Noni Gabb sees a bright future for girls in agtech

VCE AND BEYOND, PAGE 35

Picture: ANDY ROGERS

### Drought, regrowth push bushfire danger to catastrophic levels

# Fire risk back to black

By PETER HUNT

THE bushfire risk is back to Black Saturday levels in Victoria's most dangerous and populous zone, stretching from Kilmore to Morwell and covering 59 per cent of the state's population.

The residual risk in Victoria's East Central zone has climbed from 39 per cent in the aftermath of Black Saturday's fire storms to 80 per cent today — the same level it reached just before February 7, 2009.

Drought has exacerbated the situation, with much of the zone facing severe rainfall deficiencies.

Dense regrowth, fallen timber and standing dead trees have led to warnings fuel loads in areas burnt out in the 2009 firestorms could be even higher than prior to Black Saturday.

But Forest Fire Management Victoria refuses to release crucial information, telling *The Weekly Times* "fuel load data is only published to Business Level Data (an internal system), which means it is only available to internal DELWP users".

The only information publicly available is Victoria's latest fuel management report, which shows FFMVic applied controlled burns or mechanical treatment to just 8048ha of the East Central zone's 2.3 million hectares in 2017-18.

The Victorian Government's policy states it aims to "maintain residual risk at or below 70 per cent". Yet Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio told *The Weekly Times* "we are below the statewide residual risk targets we have set".

Ms D'Ambrosio refused to answer questions on whether a residual risk of 80 per cent was acceptable in Victoria's most populous bushfire zone. Across the state, the FFMVic's 2017-18 report shows it spent \$107.8 million to burn or treat 74,825ha, at a cost of \$1421/ha, a huge rise on previously reported costs of \$30-\$300/ha in 2003.


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**DAIRY INDEX SHAMBLES** PAGE 3



**EAST EATS WEST** PAGE 10



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DOWNPOUR AHEAD

# Rain relief forecast at last

By MADELEINE STUCHBERY and AMELIA PEPE

VAST swathes of Victoria are set to receive a healthy dump of rain in coming days, with parts of the state forecast to receive more than 20mm.

While some parts of Victoria and southern NSW — such as Hay and Mildura — are yet to receive any rain for December, as of Monday Horsham had received just 3.6mm, Swan Hill 5.4mm, Albury 8.6mm and Mortlake 9mm.

Conditions have been slightly wetter in Portland, which received 18.8mm for December so far, with Bairnsdale receiving 17.4mm and Geelong 11mm.

Bureau of Meteorology climatologist Blair Trewin said it

had been a dry year for most of the state, in particular northern Victoria, despite southern Victoria receiving some rain.

"In the coming days the state is expected to receive 25mm of rain," Mr Trewin said. "This will not be enough to

be on par with the average rainfall, but it will ensure conditions are less extreme."

Agriculture Victoria climate specialist Dale Grey said summer was always a volatile season for rainfall in Victoria.

"Certainly the event we'll

see tomorrow is the first event we'll see that's perhaps less stormy and more general in nature," he said.

"At the moment the prediction is for the eastern half of Victoria to get about 50mm of rain, that will put us well and

## High alert as bushfire risk reaches Black Saturday levels

• From Page 1

The treated area is a fraction of the 390,000ha annual fuel reduction target set by the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, which called on the State Government to treat a "5 per cent minimum of public land".

The Royal Commission was scathing in its criticism of the former Bracks Labor Government's Department of Sustainability and Environment for only setting a target of 130,000ha in the lead-up to Black Saturday.

Yet the Andrews Government abandoned hectare-based targets in 2015, opting for a computer modelled measure of residual risk — the simulated difference between impacts of a fire with maximum fuel loads versus one with reduced fuel loads resulting from controlled burns and past wildfires.

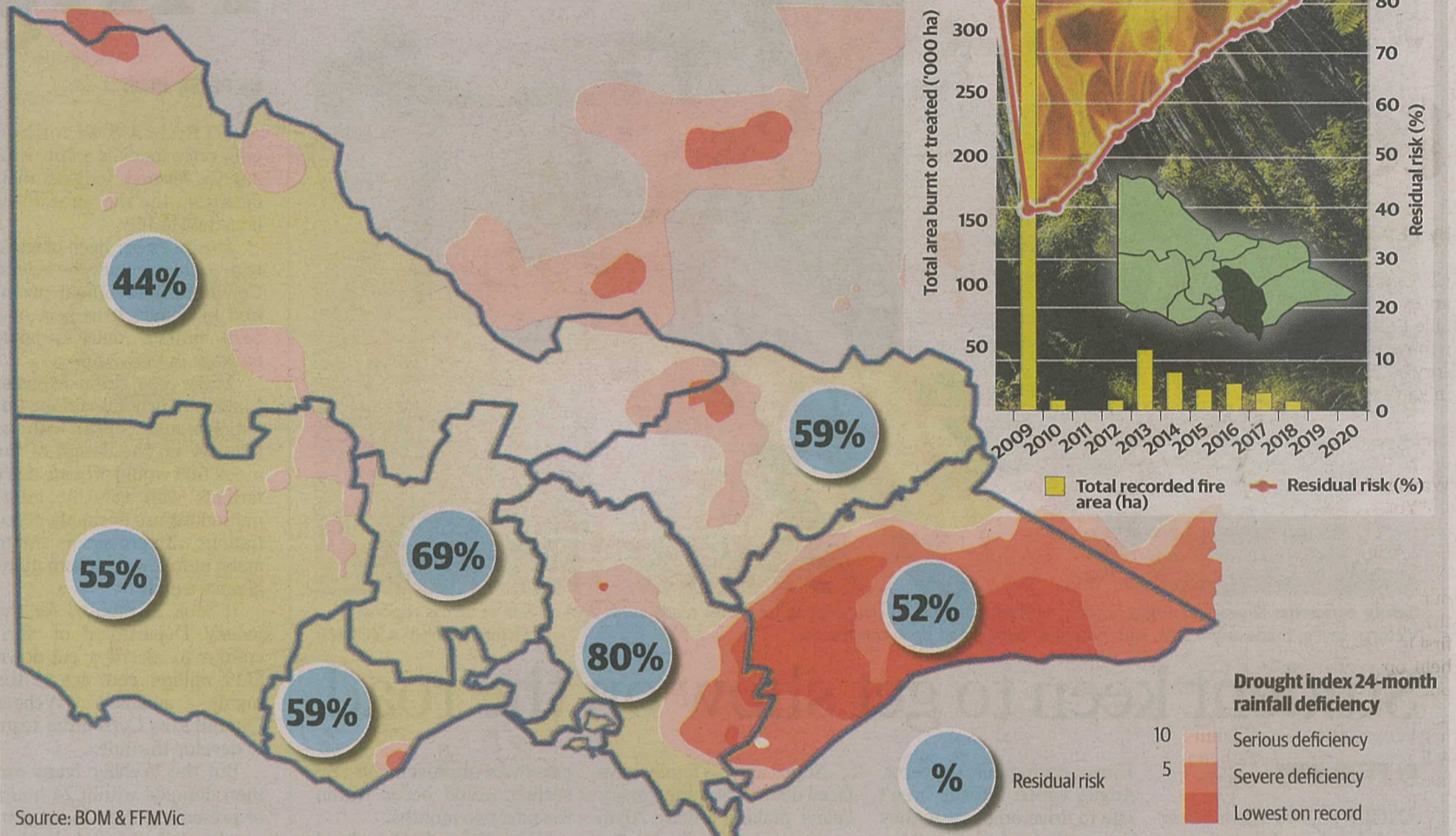
One of Australia's leading bushfire scientists, Phil Cheney said residual risk was a "load of bulls—". As the former head of CSIRO's bushfire research unit, Dr Cheney said residual risk was a measure developed "by people with no on-ground experience" running computer algorithms they "think are true". "If you look at risk, what you can control, fuel load is the only thing that matters," he said. Dr Cheney said numerous investigations had called for greater effort and resources being put into fuel reduction burns. Those include:

**The 1939 Bushfires Royal Commission:** "Justice Stretton said the amount of prescribed burning done by the then Forests Commission was 'ridiculously inadequate' because of a staff shortage and a tardy recognition of the importance of preventive measures".

**The 2002-03 Victorian**

### DANGER SIGNS

Residual risk levels and current drought areas across Victoria



Bushfires inquiry calling for an annual optimum area for prescribed burning and routine public reporting of areas treated.

**The 2008 Environment and Natural Resources Committee** reporting: "A minimum average of 5 per cent of the public land estate, comprising 7.7 mil-

lion hectares, should be adopted as the annual prescribed burning target by DSE".

**The 2009 Royal Commission** stating it was: "concerned that the State has maintained a minimalist approach to prescribed burning despite a number of recent official or independent reports and in-

quiries, all of which have recommended increasing the prescribed burning program".

Former Forests NSW chief silviculturist and author of *Firestick Ecology Vic* Jurskis said the biggest concern was that fuel loads were now higher than they were prior to Black Saturday. "Fuel (loads) in-

crease much faster after a high intensity fire," Mr Jurskis said. "It turns green fuels into dry fuel, more litter and fallen timber and you end up with a solid wall of three-dimensional fuel."

In a prophetic warning, the 2009 Royal Commission's final report warned: "The State has allowed the forests to continue

accumulating excessive fuel loads. "Not dealing with this problem on a long-term and programmed basis means that fuel levels continue to increase, adding to the intensity of bushfires that inevitably eventuate and placing firefighters and communities at greater future risk."

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# Opinion

the WEEKLY TIMES

## Black Saturday lessons ignored

FEBRUARY 7 marks 10 years since Black Saturday's firestorms tore through 400,000ha, destroying 2100 homes and killing 173 people. Victoria's worst natural disaster shocked the world and prompted politicians and emergency service leaders to swear it would never happen again.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission highlighted the failings of the past, calling on future governments and forest managers to raise the bar and burn at least 390,000ha of public land each year.

But that target sputtered and died in the midst of reviews, red tape and pressure to spend the money on projects that delivered more immediate political gains — such as level crossing removals.

Forest Fire Management Victoria only managed to treat 74,825ha in 2017-18.

Why aren't we listening to former CSIRO bushfire scientist Phil Cheney's warning that "if you look at risk, what you can control, fuel load is the only thing that matters"?

The Victorian Government refuses to release fuel load data, instead giving us a computer-generated residual risk of 80 per cent — where we were just prior to Black Saturday.

Does Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio think there's a problem? Apparently not.

Yet the reality is Victoria's most dangerous bushfire zone has millions of tonnes of fuel ready to explode this summer or next in the wake of drought and extreme heat.

The Minister best hope she doesn't have to front another Royal Commission to explain her government's failure that led to another black day in Victoria's history.

# Victoria's firefighters need to be safe at work and go home in good shape

## Ready for a firey test



It is only healthy that volunteer firefighters are fit for duty, writes **STEVE WARRINGTON**

WHETHER we're talking bushfires or structure fires, firefighting is an inherently dangerous task performed in extreme conditions.

While fighting fires, our members' physical and mental wellbeing can be tested in adverse and often superheated conditions.

Only last week, this was evident as the physical endurance of our CFA firefighters was put to the test when significant blazes broke out at Buninyong and Little River.

Our volunteer and career brigades and strike teams performed physically and mentally exhaustive work; jumping in and out of large trucks, hauling heavy hoses and fighting fires, all while breathing in smoke-filled air in extreme temperatures.

It's vital that we put their health, wellbeing and safety at the forefront of everything we do to support them.

It's our job to ensure they are safe on the fire ground and go home in good shape.

This is why CFA has launched the Fit for Duty program pilot, developed

by volunteers for volunteers to address the physical and mental demands of firefighting.

The program is simple: it improves safety and access to health services, while providing a supportive and healthy work environment — with minimal impact on brigades.

It has three parts: a health-screening component, tanker-based activities and a Mental Health First Aid Course.

In physical testing, participants perform a hose drag, an arm crank and a rakehoe drill.

Fit for Duty has undergone successful pilot testing with 430 operational volunteers from class 4 and 5 brigades in Victoria's South West Region undertaking different components of the program.

Hundreds of pilot participants took the time to show they're good to go when we need them most.

Close to all participants passed the program, while anyone asking for further support was given advice and the tools to help put their health first.



**Battle ready:** The new Fit for Duty testing covers physical and mental demands, and offers help to those who need it. Picture: ANDY BROWNBILL

Although the program is still in its infancy, it's already proven to be a step in the right direction for our volunteers.

The majority of brigades taking part in the pilot have provided positive feedback, with many saying the concept has been a long time coming.

We've also had participants in the pilot program tell us they have been inspired to change their lifestyles and focus on their health so they can return to active service with their brigades.

CFA senior leaders have all taken part in the proposed components of the program including the physical task-based activities.

The Fit for Duty team is now working with class 1 to 3 brigades to work out how Fit for Duty might look for them down the track.

We see this as an important and healthy initiative for our brigades across the state.

They deserve nothing less.

• **Steve Warrington is CFA chief officer**

## Vested interests blocking need for urgent reform

IT is astonishing how little real progress has been made in fundamental cattle industry structural reform, given the overwhelming weight of evidence supporting the need for reform.

As Meat and Livestock Australia managing director Richard Norton says: "Old ways are entrenched and interests are vested".

Two recent Senate inquiries and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission *Cattle and Beef Market Study* into the red meat industry structures concluded that Australia's cattle producers are not adequately represented under the present systems and structures, and fundamental changes must be made.

The need for a complete root and branch review of Australia's red meat



Beef producers still don't have a real voice, argues **PAUL WRIGHT**

industry organisational structure has now been recognised by the Federal Government, having announced the establishment of a red meat memorandum of understanding review taskforce in September this year.

Mr Norton said in his final report to the MLA AGM: "Industry must embrace change and the opportunities it presents. Often change is difficult, particularly when old ways are entrenched and interests are vested."

He went on to say industry has an MoU that sets out the roles and responsibilities for the red meat peak

councils and service providers, and that the review must resolve industry responsibilities and ownership of industry roles.

During a panel discussion at the recent Red Meat 2018 Forum in Canberra, I questioned Red Meat Advisory Council chair Don Mackay on how he manages matters of commercial conflict between processor and live exporter board member interests.

Mr Mackay said RMAC board members were all competitors and the board was often unable to reconcile the conflicts of interest that exist.

He acknowledged RMAC does advise government on important issues such as live sheep and cattle exports.

He conceded processors supported the closing of the live export trade, stating that it is the role of the peak bodies to deal with these issues.

These inherent conflicts of interest go to the heart of RMAC's structural deficiency and underpins its inadequacy as a one-stop advisory body for government.

It is clear that the current structures do not adequately represent the interests of Australia's cattle producers, who need a truly democratic representative voice to control their levies and their future.

• **Dr Paul Wright is Cattle Producers Australia chairman**

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# Letters

Have your say at [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au)

## Independent MP owes a lot to 'tribes'

RATHER than thank the voters who have taken a huge risk voting in a candidate with very few, if any, runs on the board Ali Cupper — a claimed "independent" who looks like scraping in by the smallest of margins — decides to tell close to 50 per cent of the electorate "the old tribal way of supporting political parties doesn't cut it any more" — insulting those she is supposed to represent for the next four years.

Did Ms Cupper forget many of her tribe, the ones that gave her preferences to get her across the line, are also tribal members of the Labor Party who quite obviously have ignored country Victoria for 15 out of the last 19 years?

Will Ms Cupper denounce her Labor leanings and assist what's left of the Opposition to ensure Labor treats the whole state equally?

Ms Cupper claims to have the skills because she is a lawyer, social worker, political graduate and activist. We don't care if she's a Rhodes Scholar — all we need is a local member to produce the goods, that is the challenge.

Mildura has had the "balance of power" before and gained nothing. Ms Cupper has no balance of power and four years to deliver with her Labor mates, or face oblivion.

Most important she needs



to treat the whole electorate with respect, not just the 33 per cent that voted for her.

**Glenn Milne, Red Cliffs**

## Futile hope for fairness in NSW

A MISTAKE that many people in the irrigated agriculture and forestry industries make when dealing with politicians and bureaucrats is to assume they are dealing with reasonable people similar to themselves.

In fact they are dealing with political people. Politicians generally make decisions based on what they think will get themselves re-elected. Those decisions are not necessarily attached to facts, figures, honesty or truth. Bureaucrats are effectively employed by politicians and make decisions based on their paymasters' commands.

Ultimately, the resolution of problems with irrigated agriculture and forestry require positive political decisions.

Yet three-quarters of the population of NSW lives in the environs of Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong, and they elect three-quarters of state politicians. Those people and politicians have no agricultural or forestry interests.

It is not possible to make decisions favourable to the irrigation and forestry industries in NSW. The people of the Riverina need to form a state separate from NSW.

Only by forming a separate state can the domination of metropolitan politicians be escaped, and only then can decisions beneficial to irrigated agriculture and forestry, and by extension beneficial to all the people, be made.

**David Landini, Wakool**

## ADF move won't aid transparency

FROM my understanding what was proposed and envisaged was an index that gave farmers an indicative milk

price that took into account the weighted international dairy commodity prices available less the processors' cost of production in Australia.

That would have given farmers real clarity as to how much real value was being delivered or lost by the individual processors' product mix, milk supply profile and pricing structures.

What the Australian Dairy Farmers have now put forward is a pale watered down imitation of the original proposal that does nothing for transparency and will be of little value in the real world.

The ADF has also created a retrospective milk price index with an attached market report. Well that's already available via a major rural bank's quarterly industry update.

"The index is not a magic bullet, but if done right will importantly provide independent and transparent market information to dairy farmers that is easily accessible and useful in making decisions about their businesses," ADF president

Terry Richardson said. I agree it is no magic bullet but the gun provided by the ADF is shooting blanks.

**Bernhard Lubitz, Leongatha**

## Big let-down on boating fees

ALL boating licence fees should be returned back into better infrastructure for Victorian fishers and boaters.

On October 31, Labor matched our commitment to return 100 per cent of boat licence fees back into better facilities, but barely a month later Daniel Andrews has already reeled in his promise.

The Victorian Government collects more than \$27 million annually in boating fees, but Labor's budgeted costings show they'll return just \$9.5 million each year.

It's a massive shortfall and a massive disappointment for regional Victorians.

**Peter Walsh, Member for Murray Plains**

## PIECE OF MIND

[letters@theweeklytimes.com.au](mailto:letters@theweeklytimes.com.au)

THIS type of theft goes on all the time. (Sheep duffing victim calls for cop stock squad return, [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au), Dec 5). Your neighbour returns your ewes with no lambs.

**Koralta**

MR Joyce lost all credibility a long time ago (Barnaby Joyce slams Mildura independent Ali Cupper, [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au), Dec 5).

Very poor form. What happened to politicians representing us instead of mud slinging?

**Kim**

THIS department name change is actually good, (Victoria's DEDJTR to be split into two parts, [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au), Dec 5). One department with too many conflicting objectives.

**Robyn**

IT should have been an ongoing percentage of his wage and bonus, (Ex-Murray Goulburn boss Gary Helou hit with penalty in Federal Court, [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au), Dec 6).

That way it would hit his hip pocket like the farmers were — an ongoing debt.

Glad it has been recognised.

**Maureen**

THESE imports are appalling, (Australia to import more dairy products than it exports by 2023, Gira forecasts, [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au), Dec 6).

Our dairy products are the best, why do we want to risk introducing God knows what by bringing in stuff from overseas?

We should be protecting our food and our farmers.

**Linda**

## POLL RESULTS

### LIVESTOCKSQUAD

Should the Livestock Squad return to Victoria?

Yes **99%**  
No **1%**

332 votes to noon yesterday

### THIS WEEK

Should CFA volunteers face a fitness test?

[theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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