

# WEEKLY TIMES



THE VOICE OF THE COUNTRY SINCE 1869



## BARR'S BARD

Young bush poet Charlotte Barr has a flair for words

REPORT, PAGE 9

Picture: DANNIKA BONSER

### The bushfire risk the Government doesn't want you to know about

# Fuel loads hit 'extreme'

By PETER HUNT

EXCLUSIVE

FUEL loads in the nation's highest-risk bushfire zone — where Black Saturday raged in 2009 — have reached extreme levels, according to the Victorian Government's own hazard map, making suppression almost impossible and putting thousands of Victorians' lives at risk.

An extreme rating means at least 34 tonnes per hectare of fine fuels have built up in the forests of Victoria's East Central fire zone, stretching from Kilmore to Morwell and covering 59 per cent of Victoria's population.

Those fine fuels stand ready to ex-

plode into flame during a catastrophic bushfire, creating massive quantities of burning bark and embers that researchers have found can spot new fires up to 35km away.

The high-risk fine fuel loads have accumulated in the rapidly drying eucalypt forests north of Kinglake and Healesville, where in February 2009 the Kilmore East and Murrindindi fires merged to burn out 169,542ha, killing 119 people and destroying 1242 homes.

"Fine fuels are the fuels that burn

in the continuous flaming zone at the fire's edge," according to the *Overall Fuel Hazard Assessment Guide*, written by Francis Hines, Kevin Tolhurst and other bushfire experts in 2010 following the Black Saturday fires.

"They (fine fuels) contribute the most to the fire's rate of spread and flame height. Typically, they are dead plant material, such as leaves, grass, bark and twigs thinner than 6mm thick, and live plant material thinner than 3mm thick."

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has spent months trying to block *The Weekly Times'* access to fuel load maps, re-

peatedly refusing to release data.

In August last year DELWP staff stated: "The fuel load data is only published to Business Level Data (an internal system)".

After repeated delays, emails and calls DELWP came back almost 12 months later stating "this information is not something that DELWP typically provides and the department has some concerns with this information being made publicly accessible".

Ultimately *The Weekly Times* lodged a Freedom of Information request for five years of data for the whole state, but cut back the request to one map after DELWP demanded

\$1294.80 to process the request.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's recommended that the department "specify the characteristics of fire management zones — including burn size, percentage area burnt within the prescribed burn, and residual fuel loading".

But as it stands DELWP's Forest Fire Management Victoria division publishes data only on residual risk, which is derived from a computer model, which gives no detail on fuel loads, which were used in the past.

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**CODE CHANGE ANGER**  
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**CROPS DEFY DRY**  
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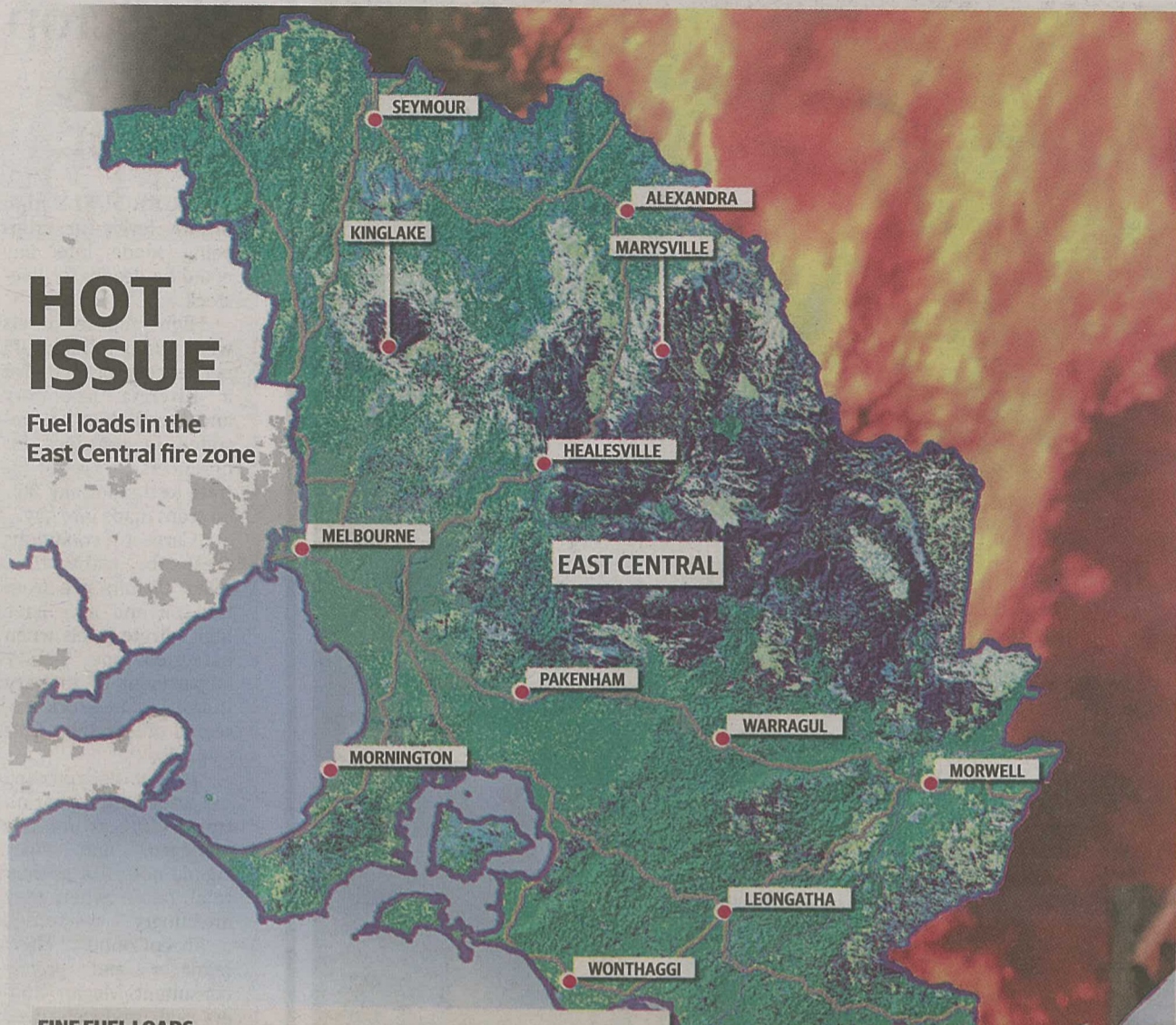


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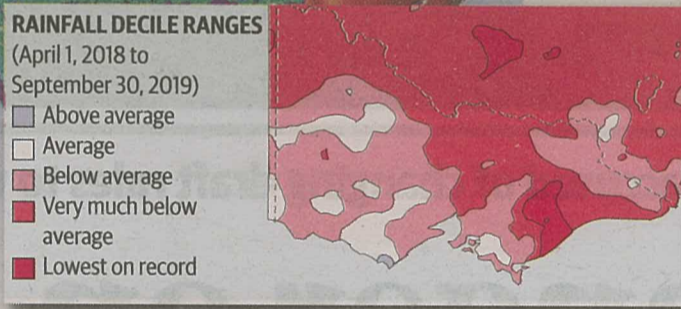
# 'Extreme' fuel load

## HOT ISSUE

Fuel loads in the East Central fire zone



FINE FUEL LOADS (Tonnes per hectare of leaves, grass, bark & twigs)					
	Bark	Elevated	Near Surface	Surface	Total t/ha
Low	0	0-1	1-2	2-4	3-7
Moderate	1	1-2	2-3	4-10	8-16
High	2	2-3	3-4	8-14	15-24
Very high	5	3-5	4-6	12-20	24-36
Extreme	7	5-8	6-8	16-20+	34-43+



From Page 1

Opposition emergency services spokesman Brad Battin said the Andrews Government's "attempt to hide information that has a direct impact on community safety" should concern all who live in high fire-danger areas.

"The only reason the Victorian Labor Government would hide this important data is they have failed to meet their targets to protect Victoria this fire season," Mr Battin said.

"With levels of fuel at extreme, a predicted dry and hot summer and a reduction in volunteer firefighters we can only say not only has (Premier) Daniel Andrews made you less safe, he now will do anything to hide the truth from you."

In 2010 the Black Saturday Royal Commission recom-

HAVE YOUR SAY

Should the Government reveal the fire risk?

theweeklytimes.com.au

385,000ha annually. But 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.

Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio said the Government was using a risk-reduction target to focus its fuel-management strategies on areas that would have the greatest impact. "Using this target does not necessarily mean we are burning less, or burning more — it means we are burning smarter."

The model has been roundly condemned by Australia's leading bushfire scientists.

The Weekly Times has previously reported the former head of CSIRO's bushfire research unit Phil Cheney has branded residual risk a "load of bulls—", arguing "fuel load is the only thing that matters".

## At ground zero Kinglake, apathy on bush risk is alarming

By PETER HUNT

KINGLAKE resident Sue Zuber was stunned to see fuel loads at extreme levels in the forests north of her home.

"When I saw the map I thought — oh wow!" Ms Zuber said. "There's an extraordinary amount of 'extreme' (dark blue) forest around Kinglake and north of Healesville."

Ms Zuber successfully joined neighbours in defending their Royal Cres homes

on Black Saturday as they were engulfed in a wall of smoke, embers and flame.

Today the neighbours' fire defence group, known as The Royals, is still going strong, but Ms Zuber is alarmed at what she sees in the bush not far from her home.

"There's a lot of new growth and a lot under my feet," she said. "It's quite alarming. It makes me wonder what's being done on fuel hazard reduction."



**Fire fears:** Sue Zuber, who has lived in Kinglake for 15 years, says she is alarmed by the growth in bushland near her home that raises the risk of bushfire. Picture: ANDY ROGERS

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# Opinion

THE WEEKLY TIMES

## Burning issue of secrecy

THERE are two extremely disturbing elements to our front-page report about the fire risk in the state's — and the nation's — worst fire-risk zone.

The first is that the fine fuel load has been able to build to an extreme level, even as the memory of what happened in that region on Black Saturday 10 years ago still burns bright.

Yet despite the death toll of 119 people in this zone on February 7, 2009, and the loss of 1242 homes, it appears those in charge of protecting our state have forgotten the lesson.

A harrowing Royal Commission laid bare what needs to be done. It said Victoria must have an annual fuel reduction target to keep the fuel load at a low level. The Victorian Government has clearly abandoned that goal.

Which brings us to the second disturbing element of this story — secrecy.

Australia's media is currently running the Your Right to Know campaign to prevent censorship by government of issues in the public interest.

The risk to your home from bushfire surely ranks high on the public's right to know. Yet the Victorian Government has done everything in its power to prevent *The Weekly Times* accessing reports that show the state's fire risk.

It first argued fire load information should only be available to those inside the Government then admitted "the department has some concerns with this information being made publicly accessible".

Every resident of the bushfire East Central fire zone should be extremely concerned that the Government does not want them to know they are currently living in a tinderbox.

Every resident outside that zone should be equally concerned that they have no idea if they are in the same situation.

New farming methods are needed to counteract climate productivity losses

# Act now or be damned



Farm research needs to lift to keep pace with climate change, writes **LUCY KNIGHT**

AUSTRALIAN governments are playing catch-up as they finally agree to new work to tackle the impact of climate change on agriculture.

The days of ignoring the science on climate change are effectively over following a comprehensive briefing to ministers on the impacts to productivity and profitability that sets out just how big the hit to farmers will be just in the next 10 years.

The numbers are stark — a 5 per cent decline in livestock productivity over the next decade, and a 1.1 per cent decline in wheat production.

As if the drought wasn't making this obvious already, climate change is a not-to-be-ignored disruption to individual farmers and an industry that is pedalling like mad to become a \$100 billion sector amid a backdrop of stagnate productivity anyway.

Yet beneath the figures presented to ministers last week were two alarming messages that must now be addressed as immediate priorities.

The report says plainly that future productivity gains from research and innovation "will not keep pace with the negative impacts of climate change". "More drastic adaptation action will be required to maintain production," it says.

That line alone should be underwriting the Federal Government's current review into Australia's research and development structure, which each year banks more than \$3 billion from Australian growers in the form of levies and matching investment from the taxpayer.

The report goes on to say "concerted adaptation action will be required to maintain both productivity and yield".

Crucially, the report identifies a "critical gap" in effective local-level adaptation tools, with direct on-farm application.

This screams what most farmers have been trying to overcome for some years, being a decline in appropriate, localised research and extension work.

Australia's farm extension system needs drastic modernisation and cannot simply be left to the multitude of private farming systems groups that have emerged to try and plug the leaks.

State governments, in particular, need to dramatically increase their investment to get modern research and adaptive work to farmers in the field.

As the report notes, future climate changes are expected to significantly



Up in the air: Farm productivity losses loom unless action is taken.

affect the sector, especially as productivity growth begins to taper off.

"This is leading to a change in focus, away from continuing productivity and yield gains, to product value and opportunities for value-adding," the report says.

The time is now to focus on getting

research, both on the impacts of climate change, and what's needed to overcome it, out to farmers in a way that enables it to be applied in everyday decision-making at the on-farm level.

• **Lucy Knight is The Weekly Times' national affairs reporter**

## Keep lifting rates and we'll be forced off our land

I AM a fifth-generation farmer at Myrning and I farm in conjunction with my wife and mother on about 800 acres (320ha).

Our most recent rates have nearly doubled, going from \$7719 to \$14,520.

We receive no extra benefit from the council for the extra \$7000 that we pay.

Nor have we budgeted for an increase of \$7000 in rates for this financial year.

Our farm's earning capacity has

Increased shire rates are both illogical and unfair, writes **PETER MUIR**

not increased, so why should the rates double?

We were not consulted by council that the rates would increase so significantly.

We have spoken with local councillors in the Moorabool Shire, who attribute blame to the state's auditor-general.

We have also spoken with our local state member's office.

However, all our concerns seem to fall on deaf ears.

Both forms of government maintain they want to maintain the rural aspect of the shire, but neither seems willing to come up with a better and fairer rating system for farmers.

The peri-urban nature of our shire brings many challenges to farming and we receive little help with the influx of people, weeds, lack of infrastructure and destruction of existing infrastructure and rubbish that they bring.

I believe that if the Victorian Government does not create a fairer rating system we and many other farmers in our district will be rated out and local production will cease.

• **Peter Muir is a Myrning farmer**



## The Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party Annual General Meeting

### Seeking Committee Members

Seeking highly motivated individuals with a passion for weed management, who are willing to take positive actions to implement serrated tussock programs across Victoria.

**Date:** Wednesday 20 November 2019  
**Time:** 2:30 - 3:30 pm  
**Location:** State Government Offices, Bacchus Marsh

For more information about the VSTWP or to view the Strategy, visit our website at [www.serratedtussock.com](http://www.serratedtussock.com)

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# Letters

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## NFF switches allegiance as hard times hit

WHEN the National Farmers' Federation ran low on funds and went cap in hand to corporate farm service providers such as grain trader and bulk handler Graincorp and admitted them as members, we knew that the farmers that they were set up to represent would take a back seat, ("Pay to walk away", WT, October 23).

Hence, no surprises when they called on the government to pay farmers to leave the land or when they recently argued that dairy farmers who struggle with high input costs in a highly regulated domestic economy should not have their farm gate prices protected through the re-regulation of the milk price.

We know that the NFF doesn't give a toss about our precious farms being sold to foreigners so perhaps we can assume that the NFF considers that a mass exodus of farmers will produce a satisfactory outcome for their corporate constituency and big-end-of-town foreign representatives.

**Jock Munro,  
Rankin's Springs, NSW**

## Activists hate life's pleasures

NORMAL Australians are sick of the same extreme people. A minority picking on our liberty



and everyday lives. The majority of city and country people are now realising that the same type of low-lives — both politicians and activists — are the same people invading farms, against all hunters, four-wheel drivers, fossickers, fishermen and women, timber mills and high country cattle farmers.

Politicians are banning and restricting this country's way of life more than ever before. It's a real issue.

For many decades we have been practising and managing our industries and activities quite well, which has created one of the best free living countries in the world.

Duck shooting has been managed since 1958 and there's still plenty of ducks.

Duck shooters, hunters, the racing industry and farmers care for animals.

It's not in our best interest to be cruel or wipe out an animal that we love to farm, race or hunt. Yes there is a minority that cheats, but the criminal should pay for their crime not everyone else.

These extreme activists are anti-everything.

These people believe that the average hard-working Australian should not have the right to come home after a hard week's work and look forward to taking their kids out fishing or duck hunting, having a day at the races with the family, enjoy a steak on the barbecue or enjoy our great outdoors the way we want to.

**Charlie Cameron,  
Elerslie**

## Someone is going to get hurt

THE Victorian Government Farm Trespass Bill lost 13 to 26, while NSW approved legislation with harsher penalties.

Victorian Labor has a lot to answer for regarding the welfare of farm animals.

Any individuals and government bodies that encourage and endorse animal activists entering private properties should also be held accountable and charged with

animal cruelty. Not to mention the threatening midnight masked invasions, aggressive behaviour and intimidation placed on the farmer and his family by these activists.

Everyone has their breaking point and soon the Victorian Labor Government will have to come to grips with someone being badly hurt, be it an activist or a farmer and or his family, due to their inactions to protect all Victorians.

**Jan Holt,  
Boolarra**

## A modern-day Sir Humphrey

I SEE Damian Drum asked for clarification from the chief executive of the Murray Darling Basin Authority, Philip Glyde, at the afternoon Shepparton meeting regarding their attitude toward farmers over the environment.

I attended the morning meeting in Moama that day where the Minister for the En-

vironment Sussan Ley was also in attendance. It was like a classic episode of the 1980s comedy *Yes Minister* or, more recently, *Utopia*.

For those old enough to remember *Yes Minister*, Sir Humphry Appleby would spend hours preparing graphs that would eventually confuse everyone of the intent.

I suggested to our modern day Sir Humphrey he was only a public servant and he should just sit on his hands and not make things any worse while we sort out the politicians because that's where his orders come from.

I would like to remind Damian Drum his government is in charge of this mess that is the MDBP and he should read the report Professor John Briscoe prepared regarding the MDBP where he states the MDBP has prioritised the environment while ignoring long term social sustainability.

Farmers are concerned about Australia's food security.

**Russell Crichton,  
Cohuna**

## PIECE OF MIND

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

WE need a change in Government, ("VicRoads funding decreases, but executives get pay rise", [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au) Oct 28). We need someone who is not scared to clean out the departments from the top down.

A Government that produces outcome for all is what is needed.

**Helen**

THIS is all well and good but what happens after they have been rehomed, ("Racing Victoria's radical plan to save retired racehorses", [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au) Oct 28).

When do they stop being off the track or ex-racehorses? If someone works at a fast food place for a few years then becomes a lawyer, are they forever known as an ex-fast food worker?

**Hollie**

WHAT is this country becoming, ("Men plead guilty to hunting offences", [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au) Oct 25).

Do these feral deer belong to the crown, who we peasants pay taxes to? The Government does not do enough to control ferals in this country.

**Tim**

I THINK this sends the entirely wrong message, ("Should farmers be paid to leave the industry?", [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au) Oct 25). We should be encouraging farmers to stay, not pay them to go.

**Jaimie**

WHAT about farms that no longer exist being on the map, ("Aussie Farms mistakes sewerage for fish in more blunders on its map", [theweeklytimes.com.au](http://theweeklytimes.com.au) Oct 23). If, as you say they are places of suspected cruelty, I would like to know how a sewage pond got on the list?

**Lucy**

## POLL RESULTS

### LEAVING PAY

Should farmers be paid to leave the industry?

79 votes to noon yesterday

Yes **41%**

No **59%**

### THIS WEEK

Should regard for animal sentence be law?

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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