

# WEEKLY TIMES



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# SMOKESCREEN

### VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT QUIETLY MOVES THE FIRE-DANGER RATING GOALPOSTS

By PETER HUNT

THE Andrews Government is using the smokescreen of fire boundary changes to lift the level of risk most Victorians face from the ongoing build-up of fuel loads in Black Saturday's worst-hit zones, leaving them more exposed to loss of homes and lives.

After repeatedly failing to keep fuel loads in check, the Government's Forest Fire Management Victoria agency simply raised the level of residual risk it deemed ac-

ceptable across the most dangerous fire zones.

The move went unnoticed until *The Weekly Times* examined archived snapshots of FFMVic's website, which showed it had raised its residual risk targets across the state's most dangerous fire zones.

Date-stamped archived internet pages show that after redrawing its fire zone boundaries, it had lifted the acceptable risk levels between March 12 last year and January this year, from:

**80 to 85 per cent** across the Port

Phillip Zone, extending from Melbourne out to Kinglake, the Yarra Ranges and Bunyip State Park.

**60 to 70 per cent** across the state's North East.

**65 to 70 per cent** in Gippsland.

The higher the risk, the higher the fuel loads close to homes, leaving more Victorians exposed to losing property or lives on catastrophic code red days.

In the lead-up to Black Saturday the build-up of fuel loads had pushed the residual risk levels to 80 per cent across the worst-hit Kinglake-

Marysville zone, where most of the 2133 homes and 173 lives were lost.

The nation's top bushfire scientist Kevin Tolhurst has accused the Government of being "sneaky buggers" in arbitrarily resetting the numbers, without bothering to consult the communities at risk.

"To me that level should be something that is acceptable to the community," Professor Tolhurst said. "They've raised it (the risk target) just because it's easier to achieve."

Prof Tolhurst and his colleague Derek Chong, developed the Phoe-

nix Rapid Fire computer model, which is used by FFM Vic to calculate residual risk.

Originally, the Government set an average residual risk target of 70 per cent for the state.

"If the residual risk for the new Port Phillip region is 85 per cent, then that implies that the level of house loss (over 2000 houses), was acceptable (on Black Saturday)," Prof Tolhurst said.

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# Smokescreen in resetting of fire-danger ratings

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"I don't believe the extent of impact on peoples' homes and livelihood would be generally considered 'acceptable'.

"The level of risk should not just be determined by a government agency based on what seems achievable given a certain level of resources."

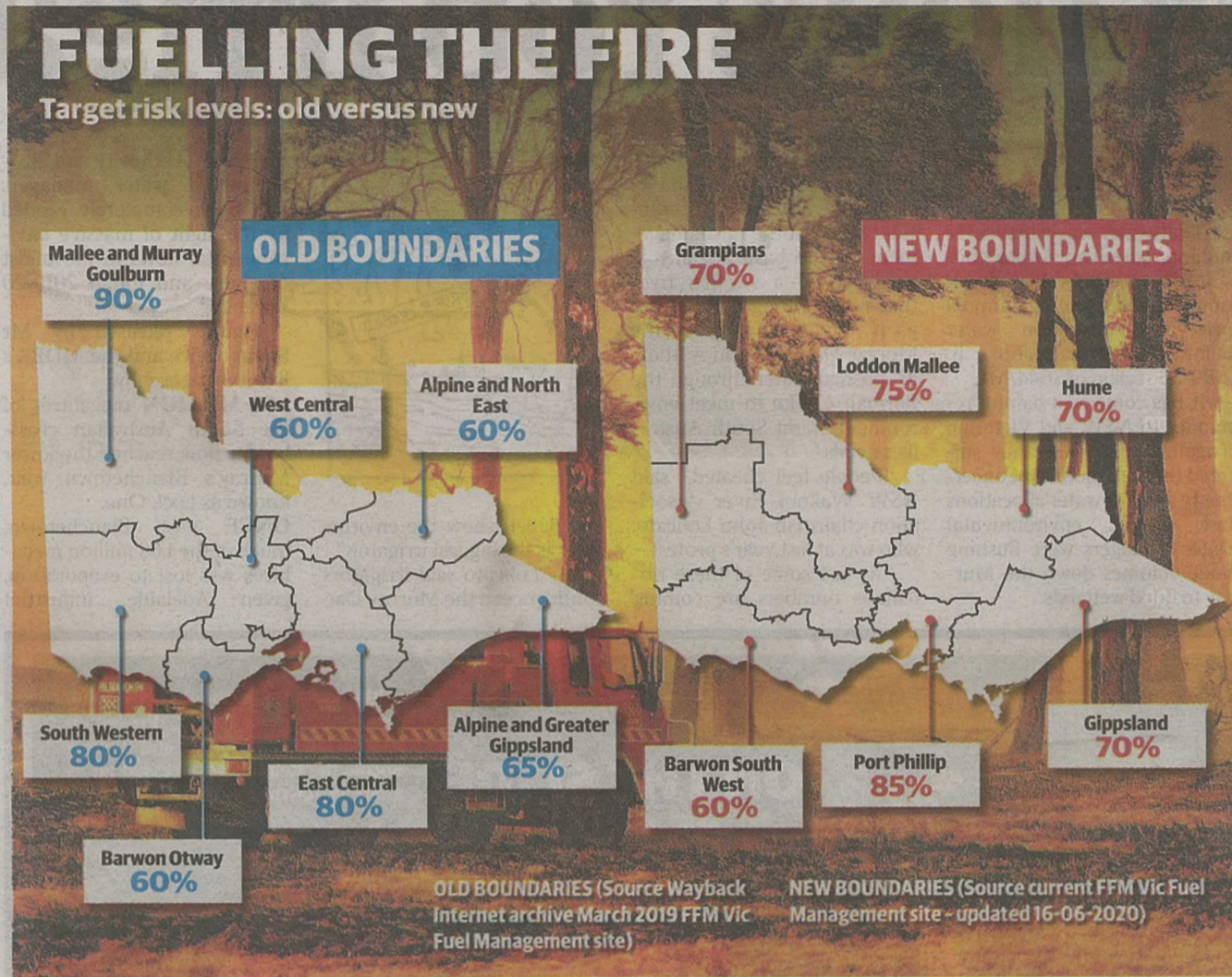
A risk level of 100 per cent equates to no fuel reduction burns being conducted at all, resulting in impacts of a fire with maximum fuel loads.

Redrawing the boundaries has also allowed FFMVic to split Victoria's highest risk East Central bushfire zone between three new lower risk zones, Port Phillip, Hume and Gippsland.

The internet archives show that in 2018 FFMVic stated that in the East Central Zone: "fuel management activities in the FOP (fire operations plan) will slow this increase to a projected 77-79 per cent, but without planned burning residual risk will continue to rise, to a projected 84 per cent by 2020".

In December 2018 *The Weekly Times* reported what was then called the East Central zone's residual risk had hit pre-Black Saturday levels of 80 per cent.

At the time Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Port Phillip Assistant Chief Fire Officer Chris Eagle told *The Weekly Times*: "The residual risk target for the state is 70 per cent, as per the Safer Together policy, and the residual risk target for the East Central Bushfire Risk Land-



scape (BRL) is 80 per cent". But this week a FFMVIC spokesman told *The Weekly Times* the 80 per cent figure was a mistake and the Port Phillip zone "has always been

85 per cent, despite the temporary error on our website". The spokesman said the original boundary changes had been made in 2017, which had then led to some risk ratings

going up "due to the inclusion of more fire-prone areas - however, it had no effect on the statewide risk rating, which remains 70 per cent". "The targets have gone up

in Hume Region (previously reported as Alpine and North East Bushfire Risk Landscape) because of the addition of the Murrindindi District from the East Central BRL.

"The Gippsland Region (previously reported as Alpine and Greater Gippsland BRL) has gone up because of the addition of the Latrobe District from the East Central BRL".

FFMVic, Premier Daniel Andrews and his senior ministers have repeatedly refused to release a full set of fuel-load maps for Victoria's bushfire zones, first stating in the lead-up to last summer's catastrophic fire season that they were only for internal "business" use, and then more recently claiming they could be used by arsonists.

Until the Andrews Government was elected in 2014, both the former Baillieu-Napthine Coalition and Brumby Labor governments had committed to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's recommendation to "fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of prescribed burning based on an annual rolling target of 5 per cent minimum of public land", equal to 385,000ha annually.

But in 2015 the Inspector General of Emergency Management Tony Pearce reviewed the target and recommended it be replaced with the computer-modelled measure of residual risk.

Professor Tolhurst said Victoria was relying on bushfires to reduce fuel loads, rather than good management.

"Most of the impact seems to do with wildfires, not to do with management, which is perverse in itself," he said.

## VFF ROW

# Hands off Farrer House HQ

By PETER HUNT

FORMER leaders of the Victorian Farmers Federation have forced the current board to halt taking any further action on delivering a strategic plan they feared involved selling members' Farrer House headquarters.

This week, grain industry heavyweights Ian Hastings and Leo Delahunty joined former VFF livestock group president Chris Nixon in

demanding the board backs off from any major decisions until after new directors are appointed.

Members were due to vote to replace current president David Jochinke last month, after he reached the end of his four-year term, as well as elect United Dairyfarmers of Victoria, Livestock and Horticulture group presidents and a new vice-president.

But in May the board deferred the elections until Feb-

ruary next year, citing COVID-19 concerns, but then backtracked this month, under pressure from members, rescheduling the elections for December this year.



"I think what's happening has been just wrong, wrong, wrong," said Mr Has-

tings (pictured), who is a former VFF Grains Group president and life member.

"Anything that's in the offing at the moment has to wait until a new board (is appointed)."

Mr Nixon said he had been told the board's strategic plan incorporated the sale of the VFF's Collins Street headquarters.

"They're talking of selling Farrer House for \$35 million to \$40 million and then spending

lots of money on advertising to get people back on board (as members)," Mr Nixon said.

Early in the year Mr Jochinke told *The Weekly Times* he wanted to deliver the strategic plan before he departed.

But yesterday Mr Jochinke said the board had decided to "put the strategic plan on hold because of what media pressure had been highlighting has been happening in the organisation".

"We will be reporting back

(to members) on what has been done," Mr Jochinke said. "(But) there's no discussion on selling Farrer House, noting that there's always been interest in the building."

VFF member and former GrainCorp director Leo Delahunty said the board needed to maintain "day-to-day governance", but he said forging ahead with a strategic plan just didn't make sense "while there's some uncertainty on board positions".

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# Opinion

The WEEKLY TIMES

Let's ensure that people are never again made homeless by bushfires

## Fire up on insurance

### No talk leads to no trust

WE need to be able to trust our political leaders. Even the most cynical among us needs to believe Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews and his team will do all they can to keep us safe and secure.

That means our leaders being transparent and open with the public on the hows and whys of critical decisions.

But that's not happening. In 2018 *The Weekly Times* exposed the fire risk in our most populous East Central fire zone had reached the same levels as those in the lead-up to Black Saturday.

Massive regrowth had not been subject to adequate fuel reduction burns, pushing the residual risk for the zone to 80 per cent.

We followed up with Freedom of Information requests for maps of the fuel loads in each of the states bushfire zones.

But then after months of delays and deferrals Mr Andrews and his ministers came out with the laughable excuse that the maps would not be made public, for fear they could fall into the hands of arsonists.

Now we find the government agency responsible for curbing fuel loads has quietly upped the risk levels it has to maintain, after struggling to meet lower targets.

Where was the consultation with the communities living in these zones?

What are the implications? There is nothing to be heard from the Premier or the bureaucrats' city towers.

Then there's the revelation the Premier and his Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton withheld genomic data showing 99 per cent of the current COVID-19 cases in Victoria can be traced back to the botched quarantine of two Melbourne hotels.

Again no transparency. The reason? No transparency equals no accountability.



Australians must have self-funded compulsory, universal home insurance, argues **KEVIN BUTLER**

EVERY fire season we watch as many uninsured homes burn to the ground and either deliberately or inadvertently accept others becoming homeless for several years with all the desperation and misery of hardship.

This could all be averted for the cost of two cups of coffee a week or \$9, hardly an impost on anyone's budget.

Universal home insurance should be as compulsory as superannuation, car registration or council rates.

Hundreds of people are now living out an uncertain future in tents, horse floats, shipping containers, sheds or old caravans waiting years for charity to help fund their new homes when \$9 a week could have averted the yearly misery for many living in homes without insurance.

Many of the uninsured deliberately play the odds. They take the risk that their neighbours will lose their home and hope it won't be them. They have the view that appeal

money will help build them a new home. Self-insuring is a furphy.

All the education in the world urging people to protect the roof over their heads has been an abject failure for the stubborn 10 per cent. Arguments to use common sense and freedom of choice are found to be completely wrong each and every year for the unfortunate hundreds when their home is reduced to ashes.

The solution for universal compulsory home insurance lies with the Victoria Government. Shire councils collect the fire levy, which is added to each property owner's rates. The same mechanism should be used for compulsory home insurance.

The scheme could work like this: WITH each council rates bill sent to every property owner, they are asked to prove their home is insured by sending back their insurance company's Certificate of Home Insurance Currency for the next quarter.

OR they add another say \$150 to their



Risky business: Failure to insure against bushfire can bring disaster for families.

rates payment for the shire to send off to their nominated insurance company to do the bank deposit and paperwork for them

No one deliberately refuses to pay their rates because shire councils can eventually sell them up when rates arrears amount to \$30,000, so everyone pays no matter their situation.

Finally, there are always excuses why we should not do what is important, such as insure our home, but

when the proverbial hits the fan (your uninsured home is burnt to the ground in 10 minutes) it's too late.

This concept has the support of everyone I have explained it to — federal, state and local government politicians and all those connected to bushfire recovery

Let's get the legislation going now by writing to your state MP.

• **Kevin Butler is president of BlazeAid**

## A reasonable agreement, but a rude surprise



We must ensure the bush remains a place for all users and not controlled by a single entity, writes **BRUCE McCORMACK**

THE Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria is cautiously accepting of the Land Use Activity Agreement, brokered between the Victorian Government and the Taungurung Land and Waters Council Aboriginal Corporation.

High Country cattlemen have always worked alongside the First People and, pending more information, I expect this to continue.

In principle, we have no problem with this agreement. We have always paid fees to have our cattle in the High Country, and expect this to be ongoing.

We have never had a problem with the Taungurung people — we have just finalised a submission on biodiversity decline in Victoria and in that we proudly detail our ongoing association with Australia's First People,

and our adoption of their cool burning techniques.

The Land Use Activity Agreement details how some Victorians engaging in activities on Crown land will be required to pay rent to the Taungurung people and this is expected to potentially impact not only cattlemen with state forest leases but also farmers, loggers, miners and even recreational activities.

Despite the association's provisional support, I am disappointed the MCAV had not been consulted as part of the agreement process, even

after the deal was finalised. It is disappointing to read of these agreements in the media, rather than being contacted first-hand.

That would have been courteous: ideally, we would have liked to be involved with formulating the agreement from the beginning, given our association with the High Country and the Taungurung People over the last 186 years.

The agreement covers 800,000 hectares of parks and state forest, stretching from Rochester to Bright and down to Warburton.

It includes sections of the Goulburn, King and Ovens Rivers.

At this stage we have no problem with the agreement assuming the fees will be passed on out of the current lease fees our members pay to the government.

I just hope this agreement does not result in more paperwork for country Victorians; any more red tape is unhelpful to individuals who now just want to get on with their lives.

While we support the theory of this agreement, we are also determined that the bush remain a space for all interested parties rather than it being controlled by a single entity.

We will work hard to make sure this happens.

• **Bruce McCormack is president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria**

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