

The Age

Opposition vows to overhaul state's 'flawed' bushfire defences

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The Victorian Coalition has vowed to reintroduce an annual fuel reduction burning target and scrap what it describes as Victoria's "flawed" approach to bushfire mitigation as a sharp political divide opens beneath the state's fire defences.

The Allan government has defended its 10-year-old "Safer Together" policy which uses fuel reduction burns more sparingly and closer to towns to prioritise the protection of life and property, and describes as unachievable the blanket, 5 per cent of public land target which Labor adopted and subsequently abandoned after Black Saturday.

Bushfire behaviour and forest ecology experts remain at odds over how best to protect the state from destructive wildfire, with some backing the government's approach, others calling for significantly more fuel reduction and a third group questioning whether the long-accepted practice of prescribed burning actually makes our forests more flammable.

The 2026 bushfires, including the Longwood blaze which engulfed this forest, have so far destroyed 338 homes.

Victoria's 2026 fires, as of Sunday, had burnt 411,000 hectares, destroyed 338 homes and killed one person. It is the second summer in six years that uncontrolled megafires have ripped across the Victorian landscape, razed country towns, threatened regional population centres and destroyed livestock and native animals.

It has sparked a bitter dispute over CFA funding, which escalated on Sunday with Premier Jacinta Allan accusing Opposition Leader Jess Wilson of spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories and Wilson accusing Allan of misleading the public, and prompted the government and opposition to sponsor parallel inquiries into the fires in an election year. Nationals MP Melina Bath, the opposition's spokeswoman for public land.

The CFA annual report containing its full financial details for 2024-25 will be published on Tuesday.

While there is scientific consensus that climate change is driving the increased frequency and intensity of bushfires, the question of how best to avoid large-scale loss of life and property remains subject to fierce debate. Nationals MP Melina Bath told this masthead that while more fuel reduction "isn't a silver bullet", it is one thing the state government can and should be doing to reduce the impact and cost of fire.

“Overwhelmingly, the Safer Together residual risk policy of the past decade is not working,” said Bath, who is developing the opposition’s public land management policies to take to November’s state election.

“The government told the public we were prepared for the bushfire season, yet we have seen more than 400,000 hectares burnt. The government has not learned the lessons of 2019-20 and rejected the recommendations of the bushfire royal commission. It is time to review and set down a new model.”

Bath says a new fire mitigation model must include a minimum, annual land area target, whether measured in hectares or as a percentage of public or forest land. The 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission’s recommended annual target of 5 per cent of public land, which equates to about 390,000 hectares, was adopted by successive governments but never met.

The target was formally dumped by the incoming Andrews government in 2015.

Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), the government agency responsible for overseeing the state’s fuel reduction program, reported that between 2012-13 and the devastating Black Summer fire season of 2019-20, prescribed burns and other fuel-reduction methods were applied, on average, to 150,000 hectares of public land a year. The figure for 2024-25 was 109,000 hectares.

Bath said the Coalition’s policy, which has not been finalised or approved by the joint party room, would focus on greater use of patchwork fuel reduction burns across all public land to slow the spread of bushfire and stop them getting out of control. It would also incorporate more “firestick” burning – a traditional, Aboriginal land management practice using low-intensity fire.

She confirmed the policy would also contain a minimum, annual hectare target.

“In the last decade, the government has done fuel reduction on only 1 per cent of public land, and we are seeing megafires costing billions of dollars in response and recovery and assets needing to be rebuilt,” Bath said. “It is impacting, very sharply, on the psyche of the Victorian population.

“Safer Together has not created a safer Victoria. There needs to be focus on what we can achieve and that means going back to a fuel-driven target system.”

The government defended its approach, which was developed off the work of bushfire risk modellers such as University of Melbourne professor of bushfire science Trent Penman. Instead of adopting land area targets, it calculates where and how much fuel needs to be reduced to lower the risk of homes being lost to wildfire.

This has resulted in less prescribed burning in remote bush and a greater focus on reducing fuel in fire-prone areas surrounding towns and rural communities.

“Our risk-based approach to bushfire management means the resources we invest are directed where they will have the greatest impact in keeping Victorians safe,” a government spokesperson said. “This approach has been repeatedly reviewed by experts and inquiries and found to be a leading practice.”

As part of this policy, the government aims to reduce the statewide, residual risk of destructive bushfire to 70 per cent. The most recently published FFMV risk management report shows the statewide risk has been kept below this figure every year since Black Summer.

The state over the same period failed to meet its targets for fire-prone districts such as Latrobe, the Grampians and the Yarra Valley, and the Metropolitan district which includes the Dandenong Ranges.

The residual risk for the Goulburn district, the area which covers the still-uncontrolled Longwood fire which started last Friday in long grass on the side of the Hume Highway and has so far destroyed 224 homes, was kept below the FFMV target between 2021-22 and 2023-24.

The FFMV report which contains the 2024-25 figures has not yet been published.

The efficacy of land area targets for fuel reduction burning was questioned by the Bushfires Royal Commission’s implementation monitor, former police chief Neil Comrie, who reported in 2013 that the approach would not necessarily reduce the risk to life and property. He concluded: “BRCIM is not convinced a proposed target of 5 per cent minimum of public land is achievable, affordable or sustainable.”

Professor Penman said the residual risk model is a more nuanced approach which prioritises the preservation of human life through the protection of private property as the overarching goal, rather than the amount of land to be burnt in any year.

“The key driver was to put fuel treatments in place with an end goal in mind, which is the reduction of risk to property, people and the environment,” he explained. “A hectare target doesn’t actually tell you anything about whether you are achieving that or not.”

“The debate doesn’t need to be ‘do we burn or not burn’. That is an old, simplistic debate. What we need to understand is how much we burn, where we burn and for what reason.”

It’s the accepted wisdom on reducing bushfire risk, but doubts are growing

Critics of this approach, such as retired CSIRO fire behaviour expert David Packham and forest researcher John Cameron, warn it has allowed fuel loads deeper in the forest to increase to

dangerous levels. Packham advocates annual fuel reduction burns covering between 8 per cent and 20 per cent of public land. “If we don’t we are going to cop it,” he says.

ANU Professor David Lindenmayer, a forest ecology, resource management and conservation expert, says both approaches are wrong-headed. His latest research suggests prescribed burning reduces the short-term risk of bushfire but over the longer term, creates a more flammable environment, and that following the end of native forest logging in Victoria, the bush needs less intervention rather than more to rebuild its natural resistance to fire.

He said the Coalition’s idea of returning to an area target was “utterly flawed” and that Victoria, instead of funding more prescribed burning, should spend its money on expanding its firefighting workforce and adopting better and faster fire suppression technologies such as water-carrying drones.

“More than half the fire in Victoria has burnt agricultural land where the whole concept of prescribed burning and fuel loads doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “I would question whether or not these huge, statewide targets and massive areas of prescribed burning is actually a sensible way to go.”

Much of country Victoria remains under a State of Disaster declaration, with seven major fires burning across the state and more hot weather forecast at the end of this week.

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