

# DSE Policy Position – Planned burning in old growth forest

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper outlines Department of Sustainability and Environment's (DSE's) policy position on planned burning in areas of public land containing old growth forest.

## **AUDIENCE**

DSE and Parks Victoria staff

## **SCOPE**

This policy position applies to planned burning in areas public land containing old growth forest. It does not apply during emergency response.

## **BACKGROUND**

DSE uses the definition of old growth forest adopted from the 1992 *National Forest Policy Statement (Cwth)* (NFPS) which defined old growth forest as forest “*which contains significant amounts of its oldest growth stage in the upper stratum – usually senescing trees – and has been subjected to any disturbance, the effect of which is now negligible*”.

Protection of old growth forests was identified as a priority in the NFPS. Following a process of consultation between state and federal governments the following reservation targets were agreed:

- For those forest types where old growth forest is rare or depleted (defined as less than 10 per cent of the current distribution of its forest type), all viable examples should be protected (100 per cent target)
- For other forest types, 60 per cent of old growth forest should be protected, with appropriate flexibility in the target to ensure:
  - Old growth forest representation is from across its range;
  - High quality habitat areas are included;
  - Reserve design is appropriate (ie can be managed practically);
  - Largest and least fragmented areas are protected; and
  - Community needs for recreation and tourism are met.

Many natural processes constantly shape and re-shape the extent and characteristics of old growth forests. Fire is a natural part of the landscape and all forests, including those which presently contain old growth forests, are assumed to have been subjected to bushfires early in their development.

The period of time taken to achieve older growth stages following a disturbance event is dependant upon the fire severity, frequency, climate, subsequent weather events and the vegetation class involved.

## **POLICY POSITION**

The protection of human life is given priority over all other obligations in bushfire management.

Planned burning can be undertaken in areas containing old growth forests.

Disturbance to an area of old growth forest caused by planned burning does not require the reclassification of the area (as no longer being old growth forest) and changes to the existing protection requirements for that area.

## **GUIDANCE**

Planned burning typically involves use of low severity fire to reduce fuel hazard. Low severity fire should have minimal to no disturbance impact on the upper stratum and the disturbance to the lower stratum (understory) is typically short term in nature. As such planned burning is considered unlikely to have a significant impact on the core attributes of old growth forest.

Old growth forests should be considered as one of many input values during strategic and tactical bushfire management planning. The impact of planned burning on this value, along with mitigation actions should be recorded.

As with the range of other values considered during bushfire management planning, old growth forest values should be treated broadly in the following manner:

- In Asset Protection Zone (APZ) and Bushfire Moderation Zone (BMZ) intensive fuel treatment is the primary objective. Individual burn objectives may be adjusted to reduce the impact of planned burns on old growth values to the extent that they do not conflict with the primary objective.

Planned burns in the APZ and BMZ are likely to be undertaken at more frequent intervals consistent with the requirements of the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land (the Code).

- In the Landscape Management Zone (LMZ) planned burning may be undertaken to achieve three broad aims:
  - Bushfire protection outcomes by reducing the overall fuel and bushfire hazard in the landscape
  - Ecological resilience through appropriate fire regimes
  - Management of the land for particular values including forest regeneration and protection of water catchments at a landscape level.

In these zones, the expectation is that individual burns, and longer term strategic planning consider the requirement to manage old growth values as one of many values.

In the LMZ, planned burns in long unburnt stands of EVCs should be selected on the basis of their representativeness and location (in locations that are naturally placed so that they are low risk both as a source of bushfires approaching communities and of being burnt by bushfires moving into them from surrounding areas).

Fire extent and severity mapping is to be undertaken post burn to determine the extent and severity of planned burns.

## **PROPOSED FUTURE WORK**

- Consider old growth values during strategic bushfire management planning;
- Develop and maintain up-to-date maps the extent of old growth in APZ, BMZ and LMZ;

- Incorporate pre and post-fire monitoring of planned burns in old-growth areas into regional and statewide monitoring priorities to improve management of old growth values during planned burning (eg. collapse rates of dead/senescent trees through repeated planned burns);
- If required, develop detailed operational guidelines for planned burning in or adjacent to old growth forest;
- If required, develop a statewide process for the regular review and accounting of the amount of old growth forest in Victoria (in and outside reserve system) updated for all disturbance types.

## DEFINITIONS

- *Planned burning*  
Planned burning is the deliberate introduction of fire into the landscape and includes all activities required to undertake such a burn in safe manner (for example construction of fire access tracks and control lines).
- *Ecological Vegetation Class*  
Over the past decade DSE has progressively developed spatially explicit native vegetation data sets classified by ecological vegetation class. The classification is based on the ecological characteristics of vegetation (e.g. dominant species, community structure) and physiographic variables (e.g. soil type, annual rainfall). There are approximately 300 EVCs in Victoria.
- *Forest Management Plans*  
Outline how forest values (including natural, cultural, social, resource and economic) are to be managed. The Plans are also based on the biological, social and cultural data present in the Comprehensive Regional Assessments.
- *Fire Management Zones*  
There are four fire management zones described in the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land 2012:
  - *Asset protection zone*  
The APZ aims to provide the highest level of localized protection to human life and property and key community assets. The goal of fuel treatment is to reduce radiant heat and ember attack.
  - *Bushfire moderation zone*  
Aims to reduce the speed and intensity of bushfires.
  - *Landscape management zone*  
Planned burning is used for 3 broad aims in this zone:
    - Bushfire protection outcomes
    - Ecological resilience
    - Management of the land for particular values including forest regeneration
  - *Planned burning exclusion zone*  
This zone excludes the use of planned burning primarily in areas intolerant to fire.

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