

Failed fire management policy must end

Raging bushfires sweeping through Australia were entirely predictable and the experts who forecast this crisis are in utter dismay that their warnings were ignored. Fuel loads are now about ten times greater than existed under Aboriginal management at the time of British colonisation, so what else did we expect? In recent decades “green” ideology has seen forests locked up, fire trails grown over, and fuel loads explode as controlled burns are prevented under spurious green rationales. Fire expert David Packham OAM has explained that a tenfold increase in fuel load means the fire will be 100 times more intense. It’s just basic physics and has nothing to do with whatever climate change may be occurring.

“It’s all preventable, this is the tragedy of it all,” Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA) Vice President Brian Williams told Jane Marwick on 2GB radio last week. “This fire has been building for the last 20 years. We’ve been burning, in NSW, less than 1 per cent of our bushfire-prone land for the last 20 years. So that means every year, the fuel loads just continue to build. And they continue to build until we get a disaster like this.” Williams remarked that once, “a lot of our areas that are now national parks used to be forested country, and the sawmillers had a sustainable industry and they used to manage the bush. They used to do a lot of the hazard-reduction burning, keep all the tracks open, because they valued timber. Timber was important. Now we’ve closed the forestry industry down—virtually, we’ve locked up the parks—we don’t let people into them, we’ve closed all the trails off. And our timber just gets burnt and wasted, and meanwhile overseas, they’re cutting down rainforests to supply Australia with timber. How crazy is that?”

Last month Williams reported—also on 2GB—that most of the controlled burns are arranged on a timeframe between 12 and 25 years, which “is just crazy”. He said it was nonsense that climate change is reducing the window for controlled burns. “We can burn right through the winters now”, he said. The problem is that they are forced to wait so long between burns that lately their fires have tended to burn too hot even on days when the maximum temperature is just 12 °C.

Recently retired group fire officer Fred Forrest, from the Mansfield Fire Brigade Group in the foothills of the Victorian Alps, confirmed to the Australian Alert Service that when he was young, they did controlled burns in the autumn of every year. The lack of controlled burns now is absolutely the issue, he insisted. Despite this, he’s confident that controlled burns can be done safely in the cooler months even with the additional fuel load that has built up in recent decades. “They are doing this, but they need to do much more and on a broader scale”, he said. In addition, Forrest remarked that decades ago, the timber industry, cattlemen and the forestry commission all collaborated to ensure good fire-reduction policy.

Typical of the “green” insanity is the Victorian Government’s decree last November to cease native timber logging by 2030 and immediately end logging of old-growth forests. Native timber provides a valuable product, but now the government has killed an industry, and locked up forests which are almost guaranteed to go up in smoke in the next inferno. Many of the large trees in Victoria are regrowth after the 1939 Black Friday bushfires, which burned approximately 575,000 hectares of reserved forest and 780,000 hectares of forested Crown land. Following those fires, planned burning became an official fire-management practice in Victoria. The proven method of hazard-reduction burning has ensured we’ve not seen another Black Friday event. But the unwinding of this proven policy in recent decades has led to the current crisis.

Opponents of controlled burning have cited events where such burns have got out of control. This is as silly as proposing to ban aeroplanes because they crash sometimes. The evidence of the overall success of controlled burning is overwhelming. Fires with excessive fuel loads are impossible to extinguish, no matter how many water bombers and fire trucks are available. David Packham, in a 12 November interview with Sky News’s Andrew Bolt, explained this scientifically with reference to the Byram fire intensity index, which measures in megawatts (MW) the amount of heat energy emitted per metre of fire front. Today’s heavy fuel loads, he said, like those that fed the February 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria, can yield 70 MW/m; but no technology known to man can extinguish a fire of more than 3 MW/m.

Discussion of “climate change” as a contributing factor by some fire chiefs has frustrated many frontline firefighters, who consistently say climate change is irrelevant. In joining Tim Flannery’s Climate Council, former NSW fire chief Greg Mullins has upset many of his colleagues. VFFA president Mick Holton told The Australian last month that Mullins had “lost his way” in highlighting climate change above all other factors. “I found he was a great person to work for, and he’s a great fellow, but I think he’s lost his way. It is disappointing to me when he would have learned about fire science and isn’t discussing the fuel load issue.” Holton said Mullins’s main experience was in city and suburban fires.

Packham has consistently said, and scientifically proven, that blaming bushfires on climate change is “absolute nonsense”. Governments pushing this propaganda should take note of Packham’s stern warning in his 2015 submission to the Victorian Parliament: “The current land management policy and practice puts citizens in peril. Such acts with full knowledge of the consequences could fall within the definition of a crime against humanity and when the next fire disaster occurs and perhaps thousands die in Victoria those responsible should be referred to an International Court.”

