



Brush-tailed
Phascogale

Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests (Mount Alexander Region) Inc.

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ANU Research casts doubt on safety role of prescribed burns

New research by the Australian National University on the homes destroyed on Black Saturday suggests that prescribed burning was only half as effective at protecting houses as clearing vegetation around buildings.

On ABC radio on January 19 ANU's Dr Philip Gibbons said: 'Prescribed burning is not the silver bullet that some people suggest it is... When the weather gets up to the extremes that we experienced on Black Saturday then we know that...the effect of prescribed burning becomes diminished...Prescribed burning is typically done distant from houses...The average distance from a house of prescribed burning on Black Saturday was eight kilometres. But we found that at that distance from houses prescribed burning had virtually no effect in terms of protecting houses.'

The researchers also looked at the effects of logging in making forests less flammable. In Dr Gibbons' words: 'We found that indeed a house that is close to forest is at greater risk. But it didn't matter if that forest was national park or state forest that was managed for logging. In other words logging had no effect in terms of protecting houses on Black Saturday. They take out all the really big logs. They take out the trunks of trees and they leave the leaves on the ground. They leave the fine fuels, okay. So they're the ones that contribute to the intensity of the fire.'

'And also if you log an area heavily you end up with a young forest that's very dense and that can also add to the fuel in a forest. It's like having a big thick layer of shrubs in the forest and the crowns are all connected.'

The full ANU research report, 'Land Management Practices Associated with House Loss in Wildfires', can be found on the Net.

The five per cent solution is no safety guarantee

Melbourne University's Kevin Tolhurst, one of the Bushfire Royal commission's expert panellists, told *The Age* in January that the Commission's five per cent target was not directly linked to protecting communities.

"The unintended consequences of [the target] will be that prescribed burning is done with minimal benefit to the protection of human life and property. It may reduce the extent and severity of major wildfires, but it may not directly reduce the impact on human life and property," Dr Tolhurst told the paper.

Documents leaked to *The Age* seem to confirm the prediction of conservation organisations that if DSE is told to burn five percent of the public land estate, it will naturally tend to burn large areas remote from settlement: fires here are less obvious to the public eye, and it's easier to burn large areas at once.

'[DSE] burnt only 1818 hectares of the 11,400 hectares it was aiming for in the central region, which covers Melbourne and its urban fringes, including the fire-prone Dandenongs and Yarra Ranges. But in the less-populated north-east, where 20 towns are at extreme risk, the department burnt 64,969 hectares, or 150 per cent of its goal.'

Although the government and DSE attracted some political flack as a result of the failure to reduce fuel close to high risk settlements, it's quite likely that their reasons for this failure are good: a wet year made it hard to conduct burns in these areas. This is a factor that gung ho supporters of management burning blithely ignore: conditions are very often too hot and dry, or too wet, to conduct such exercises.

What is much more pertinent is that the five per target DSE has been set causes them to burn widely and destructively in remote areas in the north east and north west with no benefit to public safety, and with probably significant environmental damage. FOBIF is currently concerned about burning exercises in the Castlemaine Diggings NHP and Upper Loddon State Forest which we believe are unnecessary for human safety, and highly questionable environmentally.

Connecting Country Education Program 2012 is on the way

The successful Connecting Country Education program starts again in March. The theme is Conservation and Farming, and there'll be talks, workshops and field trips. For more details go to www.connectingcountry.org.au

Connecting Country Reference Group meeting

This will be held on Monday the 20 February at 7pm in the Ray Bradfield Room, Castlemaine. There will be an opportunity to meet our two new staff members – Michael Luke (Barkers Creek Cleanup Project Officer) and the new Landcare Facilitator. The recently appointed Natural Environment officer, Kylie Stafford, from the Mt Alexander Shire will also be in attendance. The Forest Creek Action Plan will be launched.

Fuller versions of these reports, plus other info on local natural history and management issues can be found on www.fobif.org.au

Remember: we are keen to get members' photos and/or observations on the natural scene for posting on our website.

2012 subscriptions were due last December. If you haven't sent your subscription, forms are available on the FOBIF website (www.fobif.org.au) or just send \$10 (individual) or \$15 (family) to FOBIF (PO Box 322 Castlemaine 3450) with your name and address.

**FRIENDS OF THE BOX-IRONBARK FORESTS
(MOUNT ALEXANDER REGION)**

BUSHWALKS 2012

Our walks are on Sundays. We meet at 9.30am outside 30 Templeton Street, Castlemaine (Continuing Ed.) and carpool to the start of the walk. Bring water, morning tea and lunch for all walks. Walks normally finish mid afternoon. Non-members welcome. No cost.

Walks are cancelled on Total Fire Ban days in the area. For more information ring Bronwyn Silver on 5475 1089 or Julie Hurley on 5472 5082.

18 March Muckleford Forest

Chris Johnston, author of Muckleford Forest blog, and Frances Cincotta from Newstead Natives Nursery will lead walkers through their favourite part of the Muckleford Forest including areas that were burnt in fuel reduction burns in Spring 2011. We hope the walk will promote discussion of the importance of monitoring flora and fauna pre- and post- burns, and who should do it. c. 6km. For more information contact Frances Cincotta on 5476 2691.

15 April Geological Mysteries

Where did the gold come from? A question to solve in a 5km ramble in the Chewton/Forest Creek area exploring hot springs, west/north west fracture and other geological features. For more information contact Julian Hollis on 5470 5002.

20 May Chewton

We'll go over the Monk and do a circuit taking in Cobbler's Gully, the Herron's Reef diggings and possibly the Crocodile reservoir. There'll be plenty of heritage interest and natural features to take in. c. 10 kms. For more information contact Lionel Jenkins and Barbara Guerin on 5472 1994.

17 June Yandoit

The McKinnon property at Yandoit has historically been heavily grazed by sheep but over the past 15 years more and more areas have been fenced to exclude stock. The area of some 1100 acres is therefore a useful study of revegetation strategies. c. 5km. For more information contact Malcolm Fyffe on 0427 766 291.

15 July Tarilta Gorge

Walk along the south end of Tarilta creek near Mt Franklin through a very remote area that has a wilderness feel about it. We will walk along parts of Hunts water race, an amazing piece of engineering that delivered water to the dry diggings and Browns Gully area. Finish on Porcupine ridge with great views from Mount Misery. 10-12 km. For more information contact Doug Ralph on 5470 5407.

19 August Muckleford Forest

The area between Mia Mia Track and Spring Hill Track is a hotspot for threatened woodland birds including Crested Bellbird, Spotted Quail-thrush, Hooded and Red-capped Robins, Chestnut-rumped Heathwren, Painted Honeyeater and Diamond Firetail. This walk will 'promise' to hear and/or see at least three of these cryptic and elusive woodland bird species plus a show of early spring wildflowers. 3-4 km. For more information contact Geoff Park on 0418 138 632.

16 September Coliban Channel

Exploration of the Coliban Channel water system and the interesting head works and tunnel around the Springs Road area. c. 6km. For more information contact Muriel Sovar on 5472 1709.

21 October Fryers Ranges

This walk will be in the Fryers Ranges State Forest and the Fryers Ridge Conservation Reserve behind Taradale. An easy/medium walk through some of the best wildflower areas in the Mount Alexander Shire. c. 12km. For more information contact Richard Piesse on 0448 572 867.