



I write this from my experiences as a local resident, who lived through the fires and talked to people involved in fighting them.

My property is at the foothills of Mt Buffalo. One of the major fires in this area started on Anderson's Peak, which is visible from our place. I was thus able to observe the behaviour of this fire over a three week period, from its beginnings until rain effectively extinguished it.

On the other hand, my knowledge of the fires is limited by the fact that, because the fires were so close, it was not safe to leave my property during this period for any length of time. Thus, I can only comment on my own personal experiences, or on information gained by talking to others.

Fire reduction has environmental and economic impacts upon the Ovens Valley.

Reduction burns must necessarily be carried out during periods of still, dry weather. This means that there is little or no wind, so the smoke from fire reductions stays in the valleys.

This causes health problems (the Ovens Valley has one of the highest incidences of asthma and related conditions in Victoria, if not the world) and has an economic impact, as the smoke discourages tourism at one of the peak tourism periods of the year.

So, when fire reduction burns do take place, there is great pressure on the DSE and Parks not to proceed, from both residents and the business community.

From conversations with members of the DSE & Parks, it was very clear to me that the hazard reduction undertaken over the last few years was adequate given the conditions.

Many years of below average rainfall has meant that it has been too hazardous for normal fire reduction targets to be achieved without unacceptable public risk.

I myself witnessed the severity of the conditions when reduction burning around my property in September 2002. Fires lit – even after rain – burnt far more fiercely than we expected, given our experiences in previous years. A fire lit in a patch of dead blackberries, for example, spread to still living stands, which burnt equally fiercely.

A neighbour (and resident of the local area for over 60 years) was forced to call the CFA during the same period when a 'normal' fuel reduction burn burnt far more fiercely than he had anticipated, and jumped the river into a neighbouring property. (This person would certainly identify himself as a local expert with a deep understanding of the bush).

I asked local DSE employees, some of whom had grown up in the area and all of whom have lived and worked locally for many years, what difference it would have made if they had 'hazard burnt' the entire area (i.e. the entirety of the mountain ranges) in the months previous to the fire. The answer was always 'none'.

Again, my own experience bears this out. The fire which burnt closest to our property, and which my husband was involved with fighting, was a very slow, cold fire, which moved only a few kilometres over a week – in other words, a classic ‘reduction burn’ fire. We not only continued to experience further outbreaks once the fire front had passed, but it was also obvious that the area could burn again.

This is because hazard reduction fires only reduce the hazard on the ground; a slow fire does not burn the canopy.

Furthermore, any fire creates a continuing fuel supply, by drying off greenery and killing the understorey and some trees, which then creates a standing supply of dry fuel.

Again, a visit to Mt Buffalo National Park a couple of weeks after the fire confirmed this – the ground was scattered with dry leaves from the canopy and half burnt branches and logs. Very clearly, the area was still fire prone, despite the severity of the fires.

A reduction fire which did burn the canopy would, of course, result very quickly in the complete devastation of the bush.

It has been suggested that cattle should be returned to places such as Mt Buffalo to aid in fuel reduction.

The fires began on Mt Buffalo on almost sheer rock faces, which would have been almost impossible for men to traverse, let alone cattle. Also, cattle eat grass, not leaves and bark, so their contribution to hazard reduction is restricted to grassy areas.

Concern has been expressed that tracks had not been maintained adequately.

Again, in conversations with DSE & Parks employees, it was made very clear to me that tracks can be put in very quickly, and that it is more effective, both in economic and firefighting terms, to put tracks in where and when they are needed, rather than to maintain (for perhaps twenty or thirty years with no use) tracks which may then turn out to be inappropriate for that particular fire event.

The only tracks which DSE & Parks seemed to feel should be maintained were ridge tracks. (Tracks which go up hills are easily leapt by fire; ridges always slow the flames down and give a chance to contain the fire).

It was suggested that those with expertise in firefighting locally should list where the tracks were (it’s easier to push in a new track where an old one has been ) and maintain a register of tracks which should be maintained and why, so that this knowledge is not lost.

There have been criticisms that those co ordinating the fire effort ignored local advice.

At the community fire meeting which I attended (the only one I could, as our road was closed), the CFA controllers encouraged local input.

I believe also that some of the failure to use local expertise was more a result of the 'big picture' the controllers had to look at, rather than prejudice against local knowledge.

For example, controllers had to take the Bureau of Meteorology predictions into account when making decisions about fire fighting. Unfortunately, the BoM almost consistently 'got it wrong'. It was frustrating for locals to see days of perfect weather for backburning go by with nothing happening, but the controllers of the firefighting effort could obviously not afford to ignore the BoM predictions – if they had allowed a backburn to go ahead against BoM advice, and it had gone disastrously wrong, they would have not had a leg to stand on legally.

It would seem that BoM needs to develop programs which can more accurately predict weather behaviour in fire incidents. It has been suggested to me that some of the current assumptions factored into their programs were not correct – for example, their programs assume some degree of moisture at ground level, when, owing to the drought, there was virtually none.

Certainly, any local who kept abreast of these things could testify that BoM predictions were almost always incorrect, and this lead to great difficulties in predicting fire behaviour.

Locals have also complained that they were not allowed to fight fires and that the CFA was far too cautious in allowing members to tackle the fires.

As the wife of one of the local firefighters, I felt a lot better waving him off knowing he would come back safely!

If locals do want to fight fires, I encourage them to follow my husband's example, join the local CFA and pass the appropriate tests. Then there will be no difficulties in their being allowed to fight fires in future.

I would suggest that communities who live in bushfire prone areas need greater education about the environment in which they live, so that they properly understand the behaviour of fires and the actions they need to take to protect themselves and their property.

We live in an area which wants to burn, and needs to biologically. Unless we as residents recognise and accept this, we will always be left looking for someone to blame after fire events like this one.