

Australia: Bushfire expert exposes decades of government neglect

Will Marshall
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In the aftermath of bushfires that devastated parts of Victoria on February 7, the state Premier John Brumby has established a Royal Commission, which he claims will investigate all aspects of the inferno that killed more than 200 people.

State and federal inquiries into previous bushfire disasters, however, have consistently whitewashed government culpability. At the same time, key recommendations have been ignored and governments have pursued free-market policies that undermine emergency fire-fighting services.

Last week the WSWs interviewed Athol Hodgson, president of Forest Fire Victoria (FFV), about the February 7 inferno and government cuts to forest management and fire-fighting services. Hodgson is one of several fire-fighting experts who have criticised the government for failing to carry out adequate back-burning and fuel reduction measures.

Hodgson has over 50 years of experience in fire management in Australia and internationally. He was formerly Commissioner for Forests, Forests Commission of Victoria, and then Chief Fire Officer, Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. He was a member of the Country Fire Authority board and the State Disaster Committee.

The FFV was established by scientists and experienced fire-fighters in response to the state government's inquiry into the Victorian Alpine fires of 2002-03. The Facts of the Fire, an FFV report published in 2005, revealed that there had been a 37 percent decrease in the number of professional/technical personnel designated to managing the natural forests between 1982 and 1995.

Will Marshall: You've made several submissions criticising the state Labor government's inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian bushfires. Could you elaborate?

Athol Hodgson: What actually happened is undeniable. There were no public hearings and the inquiry was held in the Premiers Department building, which is a most unusual procedure.

The inquiry's Terms of Reference were neither specific enough

nor were they precise enough to identify the key issues. There was no public consultation as to what they should be. Everyone who participated was constrained by the Terms of Reference, and evidence had to be given in writing and signed. No-one was given any opportunity to see what anyone else had said until all the submissions had been completed.

The Terms of Reference did not include aspects of the public management of the land other than Fuel Reduction Burning. It didn't cover core Land Management practices. The different policy of land managers was not subject to scrutiny and criticism of Parks Victoria was ignored.

WM: You state that fire-fighting is no longer the core business of Victoria's Department of Sustainability and the Environment [DSE].

AH: It [DSE] controls planning in all areas of land and water in Victoria but fire management has been shoved to one side and is not regarded as its main business. This hasn't changed. If you look at the DSE budgeting and staffing, fire management is a pimple on the back end of a pumpkin. It only gets prominence when a disaster happens.

There was a reduction of staff in the 1980s, when a lot of middle level managers left the system and took redundancy packages. These were key people on the ground when a fire started. There has been an enormous reduction in skills, as many of these people had more than 20 years experience in fighting bush fires.

In the 1990s the Kennett government took a slasher to the department and in one year about a third of the staff disappeared. No agency can function normally in that situation—it is traumatic.

And there has been a swing toward people who do planning. If your basic skill is drawing up plans for ecological measures you can't simply turn into a fire-fighter. I know that the number of people available to do fire-fighting on the ground has been reduced dramatically.

The government would probably say they have more trained fire-fighters now than they did then, but some of these are people who have finished a training course and are employed to support fire-

fighters.

WM: Could you describe the type of forests surrounding Kinglake and the other fire-affected areas?

AH: Yes, I am very familiar with it. It's mainly stringybark and gum, with a fairly dense under-storey that includes a wire grass plant that easily cuts through your clothing. It climbs up trees and when it burns it lifts the fire into the treetops, creating a third dimension to the fuel layer.

WM: What fire prevention regime would you recommend for this area?

AH: In that sort of forest, it should be burnt every 4-5 years and no damage would be done to the over-storey. This would change the structure of the under-storey and create less fuel volume, meaning that a fire would burn less severely.

We know that there has been very little Fuel Reduction Burning [FRB] in that region. There have been some areas there that may have been done even recently, but overall it would be ineffective.

The impact of the fire that killed over 200 people would have been lessened—I can't say by how much—if there'd been burning in the native forests and around houses and roads. It has to be done for both, otherwise it won't work, but there definitely would have been fewer losses, there's no doubt about that.

I'm not sure how much is spent on FRB because the DSE doesn't keep adequate records and the costs are spread over agencies. It is probably somewhere around \$20 million a year.

WM: How much would it cost to implement what you suggest across the state?

AH: Probably only another \$20 million, which is not much when you consider the cost in lives. The technology is known. The fuel quantities of a forest are measured, as well as its moisture content, and then careful allowance made for the weather. It is quite achievable.

WM: Labor government officials claim that fire reduction burning has been severely limited by weather concerns.

AH: The DSE itself debunked the argument that there are only ten days available per year. This is based on work conducted in the 1960s that left out the weekends for burn-offs. This figure, which governments seize upon, is absolute rubbish. In any one location I would estimate there are 30-40 days where it could be done.

In periods of drought, opportunities for burn-offs increase and they can be done at night. The "window of opportunity" is far greater than what is promoted. It's really a ploy by government to justify the fact that little is being done.

WM: The state government claims that it carried out more FRB than its predecessors.

AH: The state government has announced that it has achieved a figure higher than its aim of 130,000 hectares. Do you know where they get this figure? It is a Treasury figure that has no basis in reality.

In the early 1980s, the figure was something like 370,000 hectares burnt. If you look at the last two decades, there has never been anything like what's required. Under the Kirner Labor government in 1988-89, which gutted fire prevention, the figure was 40,000, while in 1994-95, under the Kennett Liberal government the figure dropped to 12,000. In 2005-06 the figure was 49,000 while in 2007-08 it was 130,000.

So when they say they have reached their target, they are ignoring the fact that for a decade there has been a huge build up of fuel. We're now paying the price for this.

WM: You've appeared before a number of state and federal inquiries. Have any of your recommendations been taken on board?

AH: No. In 2005, they [the state government], actually sacked seasonal fire fighters. One question that will be raised at the Royal Commission is how many fire-fighters are there?

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