

Monday, 18 May 2009

### BUSHFIRE DEVASTATION INEVITABLE WITHOUT FOREST INDUSTRY

In its submission to the Black Saturday Bushfires Royal Commission, the Victorian Association of Forest Industries (VAFI), Victoria's peak forestry body, today warned of a further reduction in bushfire prevention and suppression capabilities without the presence of a strong forest industry.

The submission, lodged today, says that the contraction of the forestry industry over the past 15 years has increased the risk and intensity of severe bushfires in populated areas making them more difficult to control.

"A sustainable and well managed forest industry is one of the State's best weapons in the defence against bushfires, through maintenance of fire tracks, reduction of fuel loads, provision of fire fighting vehicles and skilled local volunteers," said VAFI CEO, Philip Dalidakis.

"Our forest communities are never going to be free from the threat of bushfires, but through the appropriate use of forest industries, we can help to reduce the severity of that risk, both before and after bushfires strike," Mr Dalidakis said.

Mr Dalidakis said the contraction of Victoria's forest industries had made forests more prone to bushfire threats due to the removal of forest machinery and timber workers who actively managed the forests to make them safer and who were either contracted or volunteered in fire fighting agencies of the DSE and CFA.

"If we are going to help our forest communities increase their bushfire preparedness and have a fighting chance in the event of another fire, there must be a greater level of support for our forest industry," Mr Dalidakis said

#### Land management

Another factor significantly increasing the risk faced by our rural communities is the inconsistent way in which State forests and National Parks are managed. Such land management regimes must now be reviewed in light of the increased risk of bushfires.

"Fire does not care for boundaries, it does not care for maps and as we have so tragically seen it pays little respect to life, be it human or threatened species of flora and fauna. We must manage our public lands better and in a uniform way because if we do not, Mother Nature has shown she will do it for us," Mr Dalidakis said.

"Catastrophic bushfires are the greatest threat to biodiversity, the viability of many threatened species, future water supplies from Melbourne's water catchments and our future supplies of timber from Victorian forests."

We must reduce the risk of severe bushfires to our communities, environment and resources or risk future loss of life, water yield from our catchments, our environment and our local forest industries, which employ 32,000 people and deliver income of \$6.5 billion to Victoria.

#### Recommendations

The VAFI submission to the Royal Commission makes several key recommendations including:

- the need for forest, biodiversity, water and land management policies to minimise the risk of catastrophic bushfire as a priority and before any other issue can be addressed;

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# VAFI

## VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION OF FOREST INDUSTRIES

- the need to recognise the forestry industry's contributions to fire management within fire management policy;
- no further reductions in the area available for commercial harvesting in public native forests;
- greater integration of forest industry services and fire management across the landscape – forestry skills and resources should be utilised as part of managing our forest estate for fire;
- an increase in the use of all existing fire management tools including prescribed burns; and
- support for the Australian Standard for Construction of buildings in bushfire-prone areas.

### Fire prevention

Mr Dalidakis said it is imperative that the Royal Commission examine measures to limit the devastation that occurs in the first place. Fire planning and management must be a key focus of the Royal Commission.

“It’s all well and good to focus on making buildings safer and improving communication systems, but if that occurs without focusing on preventing the fire and its intensity in the first place, then the Victorian community will have been short changed by this Royal Commission and it will become an exercise in window dressing,” Mr Dalidakis said.

A copy of the VAFI submission can be downloaded from: <http://www.vafi.org.au>

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