

## Forest Fortnight #30 – My Last Post ....

Thursday 12 December 2019

Well folks... this brings me to an end of my regular forest history column.

This collection of oddments started as a vague idea to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the creation of the Forests Commission Victoria in December 1918.

Forest and bushfire management in the Colony of Victoria from the Gold Rush in 1851 through to Federation in 1901 can best be described as chaotic.

It was foresters like John La Gerche in 1882 that fought the illegal timber splitters and profligate miners to protect and restore State forests around Creswick which had been degraded by the gold mining, while the first Conservator of Forests George Perrin, argued passionately in 1888 against allowing further alienation of crown land into agriculture and to reserve more land as State forests.

The State Government responded with several inquiries, a protracted Royal Commission from 1897 to 1901, but mostly with inertia and inaction.

State forests were still commonly regarded by the general public, and by most of their parliamentary representatives, as inexhaustible "wastelands of the Crown" and ready for disposal via alienation into freehold property for the purposes of agricultural settlement.

It took until 1907 for a dedicated State Forest Department to emerge.

The fledgling department had only 66 staff and faced formidable challenges, including protecting ecosystems about which little was scientifically understood, and responsibility for vast areas of rugged, remote and inaccessible forests about which very little was known.

Later in 1918, the Forests Commission was legislated and for the next 65 years it remained a relatively stable and independent authority responsible for management and protection from fire of a vast 7.1 M ha forest estate.

However, there were a number of defining moments along the way... probably the most significant being the Black Friday bushfires in January 1939... and the far-reaching recommendations of the subsequent Stretton Royal Commission.

These events, together with the massive timber salvage operation in the forests of the central highlands and the post-war housing boom set in train Chairman A.V. Galbraith's "Grand Design", as described in Forest Fortnight #15.

Then in 1983, the Forests Commission surrendered its discrete identity when it merged into the newly formed Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (CFL) along with the Crown Lands and Survey Department, National Park Service, Soil Conservation Authority and Fisheries and Wildlife Service.

Over the next three decades, the tempo of change accelerated with many more departmental restructures and name changes.

But importantly, the family ancestry of the contemporary organisations such as Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP), Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), Parks Victoria, VicForests, Alpine Resorts, Catchment Management Authorities (CMA), Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP) and even the Country Fire Authority (CFA) can all be traced back to this earlier era.

However, there remains a strong legacy of tradition, camaraderie and a spirit of innovation which is embedded in the DNA of these organisations today.

About 84 short visual-snippets have been presented over the last 18 months or so, and I hope they have entertained as well as informed.

Initially fearing that nobody would care, I was surprised and pleased at the level of interest in Victoria's forest and fire history.

So, thanks for your feedback and encouragement. I have particularly enjoyed reading the current stories and Facebook posts.

Members of the Forests Commission Retired Personnel Association (FCRPA) have generously contributed most of the photos and their recollections. Many also felt a strong desire to capture their stories before they were lost...

But inevitably, these short vignettes have only skimmed over the rich history of forest and fire management in Victoria and there is a lot that I have missed.

I certainly wouldn't suggest they were the good-old-days, but the past usually shapes the present. But nor should the past constrain the future...

History is made every day if you look hard enough and I hope that the current sensational achievements, as well as the ordinary day-to-day things, are recorded and documented for the next generation to enjoy.

As Dr. Seuss once wisely said ...

*“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory” ...*

I’m confident that state forest, national parks, bushfire, conservation and land management are in good hands.

Moreover, there is a lot to be proud of and even more to look forward to...

So where to go for more...

<https://www.victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forests\\_Commission\\_Victoria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forests_Commission_Victoria)

<https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/cchc/collections/>

<https://noelfraser.smugmug.com/>



*History is made every day if you look hard enough. Night firebombing became an operational reality in January 2019 at Rosedale. Photo: EMV.*

<https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/news/night-firebombing-deployed-for-the-first-time>



*A parting thought...*