

Growth Rings ...

Thursday 12 December 2019

There is always a danger making lists, but to my mind, some of the main events that shaped forest and fire management in Victoria have been...

But feel free to make your own additions...

- 1820s – Before European settlement around 88% of the 23.7 million ha colony was tree-covered.
- 1851 – The Colony of Victoria splits from NSW.
- **1851** – Black Thursday bushfires with an estimated 5 million ha burnt.
- 1850s – Gold Rush and land clearing boom.
- 1852 – Timber regulations under the Lands Act.
- 1862 – First sawmill licences under Lands Act.
- 1865 – Forest management was chaotic, and the Argus Newspaper championed the cause of protecting our forests.
- **1869** – First Overseer of Forests and Crown Land Bailiff, William Ferguson appointed.
- 1871 – Local Forest Boards attempted to exercise some control, however, the task of regulating wasteful clearing proved formidable and they were abolished in 1876.
- 1872 – First Government nursery established at Macedon by William Ferguson with the aim to restore land degraded by gold mining.
- 1873 – Some 1150 steam engines in the gold mining industry were indiscriminately devouring over one million tons of firewood.
- 1881 – Despite wild claims of trees over 500 feet tall, Victoria's tallest tree was measured near Thorpdale by a surveyor, George Cornthwaite at 375 feet before it was chopped down.
- **1882** – John La Gerche appointed as one of sixteen foresters held out a promise to end the forest destruction and wastage.
- 1888 – First Conservator of Forests, George Samuel Perrin was appointed.
- 1888 – Melbourne Centennial Exhibition offers a reward for the tallest forest tree. The "New Turkey Tree" near Noojee won at 326 feet 1 inch and a girth of 25 feet and 7 inches.
- Three independent reports from D'A. Vincent (1887), Perrin (1890), Ribbentrop (1895) into the parlous state of Victoria's forests.
- 1891 – Melbourne's forested water catchments vested in the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW).
- 1893 – First royalty regulations made under the Lands Act.
- **1897 – 1901**. Royal Commission into forest destruction after the gold mining boom and indiscriminate land clearing.
- **1898** – Red Tuesday bushfires, mainly in south Gippsland.
- 1900 – State forests were still commonly regarded by the general public, and by most of their parliamentary representatives, as the inexhaustible "Wastelands of the Crown" and ready for disposal via alienation into freehold property for the purposes of agricultural settlement.
- 1901 – Federation and the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia. Forest management and bushfire remain the responsibility of the States.
- 1851 – 1907. The responsibility for the administration of Victoria's forest estate had been shunted back and forth at least eleven times between three Government Departments including Lands and Survey, Agriculture and Mines.
- **1907** – Legislation finally passed to create a State Forest Department with Hugh Robert Mackay as the first Conservator. The fledgling Department had 66 staff.
- **1910** – Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick opens. The first headmaster was Thomas Stephan Hart.
- 1911 – Opening of the Newport experimental seasoning workshop and kilns.
- 1914 – 1918 World-War-One drew men away from the Forests Service including Albert Jacka who was perhaps Australia's finest fighting soldier and has the honour of being the first Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest decoration for gallantry in the face of the enemy.
- 1916 – Reginald Graham Lindsay was one of the first foresters to graduate from the School of Forestry in 1910 and was Killed-in-Action on New Year's Eve.
- 1916 – Experimental pine plantations were established on a number of coastal sites including Anglesea, French Island, Korumburra and Frankston. The largest plot was some 2500 acres associated with the new McLeod Prison farm on French island. Nearly all these coastal plantings failed due to soil and site conditions.
- **1918** – State Parliament legislation passed only weeks after the end of WW1 to create an

independent three-person Forests Commission Victoria.

- **1919** – Owen Jones appointed the first FCV Chairman. Jones was a thirty-two-year-old graduate Welsh forester trained at Oxford with practical forestry experience in the Ceylon and served during WW1 with the Royal Flying Corp.
- 1919 – A forestry fund allows the Commission to keep half its revenue giving it a degree of independence from Government.
- 1920 – First Premier’s Conference attempts to formulate a National Forest Policy.
- 1925 – Owen Jones, the first Chairmen of the Forests Commission, resigned suddenly in what is thought to be a dispute with the State Government over their plans to allow more clearing of State forests for farmland in the Otways. William Code becomes Chairman and the land is cleared.
- 1926 – Black Sunday bushfires.
- 1926 – Wellsford eucalyptus distillation plant established near Bendigo. The Principal of the Forestry School, Edwin Semmens conducts many of the early experiments.
- **1927** – Three Norwegian foresters arrive to establish the assessment branch.
- 1928 – Australia’s first aerial photography project covering 15000 acres of forest flown by the RAAF.
- 1928 – The steam era and the purchase of the Climax steam engine to run on a departmental railway near Erica to supply the State Sawmill.
- 1929 – Public pressure is mounting to conserve forests from logging, so the Cumberland Memorial Scenic Reserve is dedicated to returned soldiers by the Minister and includes the Cora Lynn and Cumberland Falls as well as the “Sample Acre” of tall trees.
- 1930 – Bushfire Awareness Week opens in January with great flourish. An Australian first.
- 1930 – First flights of RAAF Wapiti aircraft for fire spotting.
- 1930s – During the Great Depression the Forests Commission employs thousands of men in Susso programs as well as 15 Boys Camps. Lots of infrastructure projects in rural Victoria.
- 1936 – Beginning of the Strzelecki reforestation program to restore the “Heartbreak Hills”. A program that ran quietly for the next 60 years.
- 1936 – A small sheltered grove of Coast Redwoods was planted in the Aire Valley in the Otway Ranges.
- **1936** – Opening of the APM pulpwood plant at Maryvale under a Legislated Supply Agreement.
- 1937 – The Forests Commission and APM conduct Australia’s first firebombing trials. The US Forest Service commences trials around the same time. The two agencies begin a long-term collaboration that continues to this day.
- **1939** – 13 January, Black Friday bushfires where 2 million ha burnt, and 71 people died including four staff.
- **1939** – Scathing Stretton Royal Commission report into the bushfires sets a new direction. The Forests Commission gained additional funding and took responsibility for fire protection on all public land including State forests, unoccupied Crown Lands and National Parks plus a buffer extending one mile beyond their boundaries on to private land and its responsibilities grew in one leap from 2.4 million to 6.5 million hectares.
- 1939 – Newly appointed Fire Protection Officer, Alf Lawrence, immediately set about the huge challenge of rebuilding a highly organised and motivated fire fighting force, introducing more RAAF fire spotting patrols, new fire towers and lookouts, modern vehicles, fire tankers and equipment such as powered pumps and crawler tractors, as well as a statewide radio. communications network, VL3AA.
- 1939 – 1945. World-War-Two presented many unique challenges including completing the bushfire timber salvage and producing firewood and charcoal.
- 1940 – Many staff left for military service with the 2/2 Forestry Company in the UK and New Guinea.
- 1940 – POWs and Italian Internes were used for forest labour.
- 1941 – The secretive Volunteer Air Observers Corp set up to scour the coast for submarines and the forest for bushfires.
- 1941 – The Commission purchased the paddle steamer Hero to transport logs from Barmah to Echuca during the wartime firewood emergency. The Commission also rebuilt the historic Echuca wharf.
- 1941 – Kurth Kiln at Gembrook built to supply charcoal for motorists during the War.
- 1942 – Bill Ah Chow completes Moscow Villa on Bentley’s Plain.
- 1943 – 1944. Bushfires across Victoria leave 51 people killed, 700 injured and 650 buildings destroyed.

- **1944** – CFA formed after a second Bushfire Inquiry by Judge Stretton which finally brought some clarity to bushfire responsibilities in rural Victoria.
- 1944 – Save the Forests campaign begins, led by the FCV.
- **1945** – Radio VL3AA broadcasts across Victoria for the first time.
- 1945 – About 3.4 million hectares of forest were photographed by the RAAF and used to produce orthophoto maps.
- 1946 – A new fleet of army surplus vehicles including Blitz trucks, White Scout cars and fire equipment begins to arrive. Staff morale improves.
- 1946 – Firebombing trials recommence at Anglesea dropping 500 lb bomb casings to compare the performance of different RAAF aircraft.
- 1946 – Industrial land at North Altona purchased for a fire cache and workshop to become Aladdin's Cave of Wonders.
- 1947 – Forests Commission sponsored Australia's only military sawmilling unit, the 91 Forestry Squadron (the Woodpeckers)
- 1948 – Establishment of a Committee of Management for Mt Buller leads to the rapid expansion of the snow resort.
- 1948 – The forest road network has expanded to over 5000km.
- **1949** – Helicopter trials with a RAAF Dragonfly begin at Erica.
- 1949 – Chairman A. V. Galbraith dies suddenly after a 31-year career as Commissioner. Alf Lawrence steps up while Finton Gerraty becomes Chairman until he also dies suddenly in 1956.
- 1950 – Royalty Equation System introduced to sell forest produce and reduce wastage associated with "sawmiller selection".
- **1950s** – "The Grand Design" leads to the eastward movement of the timber industry in the wake of the 1939 timber salvage. Forest assessment and then road-building expand to meet Victoria's post-war timber needs. Sawmills are prohibited from establishing in the forest and more powerful logging trucks lead to small "Timber Towns" like Heyfield, Orbost and Swifts Creek.
- 1951 – Edwin James Semmens (OBE) retires after a 23-year career as Principal of the Forestry School.
- 1951 – State sawmill at Erica closes. Last trip of the Climax steam engine which was later obtained and restored by Puffing Billy Railways.
- 1956 – Forests Commission underwent a major restructure to create 56 districts. Things remained largely unchanged for the next three decades.
- 1956 – The National Parks Service is formed.
- 1956 – Newport seasoning workshop closes under a financial cloud.
- 1957 – The Forests Commission sets aside Sherbrook Forest Park as the first of many parks and reserves including Lerderderg Gorge, You Yangs, Mt Cole, Grampians and Mt Baw Baw.
- 1957 – The 1939 fire salvage operation draws to a close as the last of the timber stockpiled in dumps is recovered.
- **1958** – New Forests and CFA legislation was enacted.
- 1959 – A storm at the Sample Acre in the Cumberland Reserve destroyed 13 of its big trees. The site only narrowly escaped the earlier 1939 Black Friday bushfires.
- **1961** – Softwood plantation extension (PX) program expands by 2000ha/yr for the next 40 years.
- 1961 – Leadbeater's Possum rediscovered at Cumberland Scenic Reserve after 50 years absence.
- 1962 – Firebombing trials at Ballarat using a Ceres agricultural aircraft dropping bentonite slurry.
- 1962 – RAAF reconnaissance flights end as private aircraft begin contracts with the Commission.
- 1962 – Dandenong Ranges bushfires and the commencement of the land buyback program.
- 1963 – Tamboritha Road opens. Part of the "Grand Design".
- 1964 – Forest Commission engages a Bell 64G helicopter on a year-round contract in an Australian first. Rappel crew commences at Heyfield but lapses after two seasons.
- 1965 – Gippsland bushfires are the biggest test of the organisation since 1939.
- 1965 – Phoscheck retardant dropped for the first time in Victoria.
- 1965 – CSIRO begins aerial ignition trials in Western Australia.
- 1965 – Snowy Range airfield built which is followed by Victoria Valley in the Grampians in 1967.
- 1967 - McArthur Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI) meter first seen in operation.
- 1967 – Melbourne was suffering a prolonged drought and the Bolte Government approved works for a 20 km diversion tunnel from the Thomson River and planning to begin for the

construction of the massive Thomson Dam but with the catchment to remain as State Forest.

- **1967** – Australia’s first operational firebombing mission flown by Ben Buckley and Bob Lansbury from Benambra.
- 1967 – Delayed Action Incendiary Devices (DAIDs) used for the first time. A few months later DAIDs were used to ignite a 20000 ha backburn in northeast Victoria in what is believed to be a world first.
- 1968 – Yarra Tributary Catchments were set aside under a lease agreement between the Commission and the MMBW in 1968 to augment water Melbourne’s supplies.
- 1969 – Alf Lawrence (OBE) retires on his 65th birthday after a career spanning nearly 50 years since entering the Victorian School of Forestry. His significant roles included Chief Fire Officer after the 1939 bushfires and Commissioner for over 20 years.
- **1971** – Land Conservation Council (LCC) formed after the Little Desert controversy in the late 1960s. It leads to a significant expansion of the National Parks estate over the next 30 years aligned with changing community values.
- 1971 – Forest Environment and Recreation (FEAR) Branch formed to give focus to multiple use of forests. Other State forest services follow the idea.
- 1971 – World Forestry Day proclaimed by the United Nations for 21 March, on the autumnal equinox. Celebrated for many years by Department staff.
- 1973 – "The Fight for the Forests" published by the Australian National University.
- 1974 – "The Alps at the Crossroads" published.
- 1974 – Metrication of the Forest and Timber industry. Cubic meters replace chords and cunits.
- **1976** – First women enter the Forestry School at Creswick.
- 1978 – Crash of a helicopter at Bright with the death of two forest officers and their pilot lead to sweeping changes to aerial ignition techniques.
- 1979 – Forests Commission Retired Personnel Association (FCRPA) formed.
- 1980 – The Commission employed some 300 foresters plus a further 500 technical and administrative staff and over 1000 works crew spread across country Victoria in 48 districts and 7 divisional offices.
- 1980 – Last three-year diploma students graduate from the Victorian School of Forestry. This marks

the end of the fully-funded scholarships from the Forests Commission as the campus transitions to the University of Melbourne.

- 1982 – After an 18-year absence helicopter rappel teams recommence.
- 1982 – MAFFS borrowed from the US Forest Service to test under Victorian conditions.
- 1982 – NSCA begins trials of helicopter bellytanks.
- 1982 – Labor wins the State election and John Cain became Premier after 27 unbroken years of Liberal Government. It heralded many changes to forests and land administration.
- 1983. – Greendale fire where two Forests Commission crew were killed.
- **1983** – Ash Wednesday bushfires.
- **1983** – Amalgamation of the Forests Commission, Crown Lands and Survey Department, National Park Service, Soil Conservation Authority and Fisheries and Wildlife Service into the single Department of Conservation Forest and Lands (CFL). Professor Tony Eddison as the new Secretary with 18 Regional Managers.
- 1983 – The Forestry Fund which had been in operation since 1918 and given the Forests Commission some autonomy retain revenue and invest is closed by new State Treasurer Rob Jolly.
- 1983 – The Australian Conservation Foundation declares its policy that “wood production should be transferred from native forests to plantations established outside the current forest estate”.
- 1984 – New green fire safety overalls issued (Kermit suits). The unique colour had been chosen by FCV Chairman Alan Threader and was patented to the Department.
- 1984 – Grampians National Park declared.
- 1985 – 111 lighting strikes in 24 hours cause widespread fires across the alpine region. The largest use of firefighting aircraft in Australia at Mt Buffalo.
- **1986** – Timber Industry Strategy (TIS) sets new directions with regional sustainable yield, Code of Forest Practices and 15-year sawlog licences.
- 1987 – Clearing of native forest for softwood plantations ceases.
- 1989 – National Safety Council of Australia (NSCA) collapses which forces the Department to make alternative arrangements for aircraft. The fleet of aircraft steadily expand.
- 1989 – The Alpine National Park, Victoria’s biggest is proclaimed.
- 1991 – Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS) adopted. The

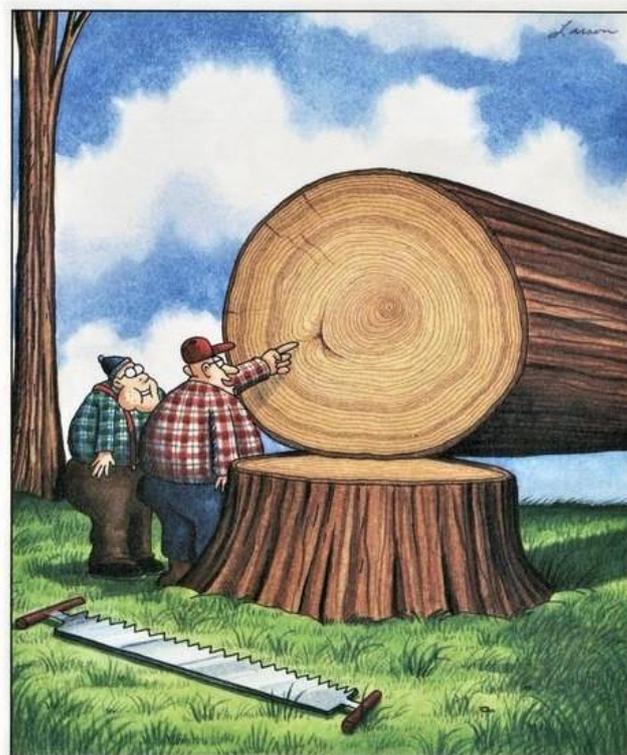
Department had earlier modified the United States system NIIMS in 1984.

- 1992 – National Forest Policy Statement signed by all state and federal governments.
- 1992 – Victorian Plantations Corporation split from the Department with a 167,000 ha estate.
- 1994 – Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) formed which took many of the previous functions of the Department including Landcare and soil conservation.
- 1998 – Hancock Victorian Plantations purchase all Government plantation assets except the land base which remains publically owned.
- 1995 – Blockade by logging trucks of Parliament House in Canberra leads to Regional Forest Agreements (RFA).
- 1996 – Parks Victoria splits from the Department and joins with Melbourne Parks and Waterways to become a separate entity.
- 1997 – Erikson Skycrane (Elvis) deployed to Victoria for the first time.
- **1998** – Linton Bushfire. Five CFA volunteers from the Geelong West fire brigade were killed. A long running coronial enquiry followed that led to many changes to the CFA.
- 2000s – The tempo, size and severity of bushfire incidents in southern Australia intensified.
- 2000 – First international fire deployments to the US with reciprocal arrangements made possible because of the earlier adoption of AIIMS.
- 2000 – The US military switches off selective availability and GPS becomes a ubiquitous global phenomenon.
- **2002** – State Government initiates the “Our Forests Our Future” program with a large buy-out of timber licences and the cessation of timber harvesting in Western Victoria.
- 2002 – 2003. Alpine bushfires. These fires were followed by a number of inquiries.
- 2003 – Forest Heritage Museum officially opened at Beechworth.
- 2004 – VicForests was formed with an independent Board.
- 2006 – The South Face Road near Erica, which began in 1986, was finally completed as probably the Department’s last major road construction project.
- 2006 – 2007 Great Divide Complex of bushfires which lasted for 69 days and burnt 1.1 M ha.
- **2009** – Black Saturday Bushfires and the subsequent Royal Commission led to the formation of Emergency Management Victoria.

- 2014 – Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) formed. In the 30 years since the amalgamation into CFL in 1983, there have been eight major departmental name changes, 15 Government Ministers, 13 Secretaries and 9 Chief Fire Officers.
- 2015 – Escape of a planned burn at Lancefield leads to the formation of Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) within DELWP.
- 2019 – Night firebombing becomes operational at the Rosedale fire.
- **2019** – The Victorian State Government flags its intention to end the native forest timber industry by 2030.
- 2019 – Responsibilities for managing Victoria's 7.1 million ha State forest and Parks estate are now split between the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), FFMV, Parks Victoria, Alpine Resorts Commission, Melbourne Water, VicForests and the privately-owned Hancock Victorian Plantations.

<https://victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/welcome/the-biggest-picture.html>

<https://victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/activities1/fir/fir-fire-big-picture.html>



“And see this ring right here, Jimmy? ... That’s another time when the old fellow miraculously survived some big forest fire.”

Gary Larson – *The Far Side*.