

Victorian forest fire history timeline*

1851 - 2015

(Original prepared in 2010 by M. Leonard; last minor update 06/'18)

* The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission final report states that '*...Fifty-two significant bushfires have been recorded in Victoria since 1851, two-thirds of them in the past sixty years...*' (Volume 1, page 2)

The Report also stated: '*...On the basis of the evidence presented, the Commission concluded that Victoria has a range of characteristics that predispose it to bushfires generally and to the occasional ferocious bushfire in particular. There are few other locations in the world with similar characteristics...*' (Volume 1, page xxiv)

1851

- February 6th '**Black Thursday**':
Fires cover a quarter of what is now Victoria - approximately 5 million hectares. Twelve lives, one million sheep and thousands of cattle are recorded as lost.

1879

- First *Forest Bill* brought before Parliament to create forest reserves, management powers etc. This Bill and subsequent ones (1881, 1887 and 1892) are never enacted.

1888

- First 'Conservator of Forests' appointed (an officer of the Lands Department).

1907

- First *Forests Act* passed. Comprehensive treatment of most 'forest related' matters - far reaching by previous standards.

1908

- **State Forest Department** formed under a new Minister of Forests.

1910

- **Victorian School of Forestry** at Creswick accepts first trainees.

1918

- **Forests Commission** established to administer the Act and manage the Department. New *Forests Act* provides basis for the current one (1958). The Commission's principles of establishment are:
 - The conservation, development and utilisation of the indigenous forests, based on sound forestry principles;
 - The establishment of adequate plantations of exotic softwood plantations;
 - The prosecution of essential research work concerning the natural products of the forests; and
 - The need for an **effective fire prevention and fire suppression** organisation.

1919

- **Forestry Fund** established – allows the Forests Commission to keep half the income obtained from royalties etc. to re-invest in forest management.

1920s

- **Fuel Reduction Burning:**
Earliest recorded use of fire by a Government land manager to reduce fuel levels on public land.

1926

- February – March. Including '**Black Sunday**' – **February 14th** :
Forest fires burn across large areas of Gippsland throughout February and into early March. Sixty lives are lost and widespread damage occurs to farms, homes and forests.

1930

- First **aircraft** used in firefighting:
February 18th 1930. An Air Force single-seater, single engine Westland Wapiti aircraft is used for detection and for aerial reconnaissance during bushfire operations - an Australian first.

1939

- 13th – 20th January, including '**Black Friday**':
 - In late 1938, fires burn 1.5 to 2 million hectares. The fires come to a head on January 13th, 1939 (Black Friday) causing 71 fatalities (including several Forests Commission officers). They destroy more than 650 buildings, and obliterate whole townships;
 - Fires affect almost every section of Victoria. Areas hardest hit include Noojee, Woods Point, Omeo, Narbethong, Warrandyte and Yarra Glen. Other areas affected include Warburton, Erica, Rubicon, Dromana, Mansfield, the Otway Ranges and the Grampian Ranges;
 - Most destructive fires since 1851.
- **Stretton Royal Commission:**
 - *"These fires were lit by the hand of man"* The findings of the Royal Commission held following 1939 fires are to be highly significant in increasing fire awareness and prevention throughout Australia;
 - The Royal Commission dramatically changes non-metropolitan fire service provisions in Victoria and lead to the creation of Country Fire Authority (CFA);
 - *Forests Act 1939* extends the Forests Commission's fire protection responsibilities to national parks, other public lands and to lands within 1.5 km. of both State forests and national parks.

1943/1944

- 22nd December to 15th February:
Fires in the central and western districts and at Morwell and Yallourn kill 51 people, destroy over 500 houses and cause huge losses in the pastoral industry. Four or more grass fires near Hamilton, Dunkeld, Skipton and Lake Bolac burn around 440,000 hectares in eight hours.

1952

- 5th February:
A fire that originated on the Hume Highway near Benalla burns approx. 100,000 hectares and causes the deaths of several people.

1958

- *Forests Act 1958* – essentially still in existence (2013), expands many previous sections of the Act.

1962

- 14th – 17th January:
Fires in the Dandenong Ranges, Kinglake, Hurstbridge and Mitcham on the outskirts of Melbourne cause 32 fatalities and destroy over 450 houses.

1964

- **Rappelling** introduced:
Getting firefighters into difficult and inaccessible terrain was often difficult. The development of the rappelling technique – lowering of firefighters from a hovering helicopter, was first introduced at Heyfield - an Australian first.

Rappelling trials were first conducted by the Forests Commission using a Bell 47G helicopter. Rappel operations were then conducted by a two-man crew based at Heyfield for the following two fire seasons.

1965

- 15th February – 13th March:
Fires in Gippsland burn for 17 days, covering 300,000 hectares of forest and 15,000 hectares of grassland. Three fatalities, over 60 buildings and 4,000 head of stock are destroyed.

1967

- First operational use of **aerial firebombing** (with water) in Australia - using fixed-wing agricultural aircraft.

1969

- 8th January:
280 fires break out on the 8th of January 1969. Of these, 12 grass fires reached major proportions and burn 250,000 hectares. 23 people die, including motorists at Lara, trapped on the main Geelong to Melbourne road.

1970

- Formation of the **Land Conservation Council**:
This follows a controversial proposal by the Minister for Lands to develop 0.2 million hectares of mallee vegetation in the Little Desert.

1972

- 14th December:

A fire at Mount Buffalo burns for 12 days, covering an area of approximately 12,140 hectares. This area includes 7,400 hectares of State forest and 4,520 hectares of the National Park.

1977

- **12th February:**
Widespread fires occur across the Western District of Victoria, mostly in grasslands. The fires cause the deaths of eight people and burn around 135,000 hectares. More than 255,500 head of stock, 116 houses and 340 buildings are lost.

1981

- As part of increasing use of aircraft to assist in fire management operations, firebombing trials involving the use of a C130 Hercules, on loan from the RAAF commence, and continue for two years. Eventually judged non-viable due to high costs and lengthy turn-around times.

1982

- Rappel operations re-commence.

1983

- **Greendale Fire:**
A severe fire season looms for south-eastern Australia following a prolonged drought. Two Forests Commission firefighters die on the 8th of January 1983 while attempting to control a bushfire at Greendale north of Ballan (the first FCV officers to die in a bushfire since 1939);
- **Ash Wednesday, 16th February:**
Victoria experiences record levels of fire danger. Significant fires at East Trentham-Macedon, Deans March-Lorne, Upper Beaconsfield, Cockatoo, Warburton and Framlingham result in the loss of 47 lives 2,500 buildings and 33,000 head of stock.
- Creation of the Department of **Conservation, Forests and Lands (CFL):**
Following reviews of public land and natural resource agencies the State Forests Department becomes part of CFL. (The Forests Commission continued to exist in law until 1984).

1985

- One hundred and eleven lightning-caused fires start on public land between late afternoon on 14 January and 0900 hours the next day. The campaign mounted to fight the fires becomes the largest ever undertaken against forest fires in Victoria with over 3000 people involved. The fires were brought under control, despite the absence of rain, in the following two weeks.

1990

- CFL becomes the Department of **Conservation and Environment (DCE)**

1991

- **AIIMS-ICS** adopted nationally:
Following the development by the FCV/CFL/DCE of a 'Large Fire Organisation' structure (based on the U.S. 'National Interagency Incident Management - Incident Command System') to manage fire suppression operations, the Department (DCE) is instrumental in Australia developing a national approach. This is titled AIIMS-ICS: the *Australian Inter-service Incident Management System – Incident Control System*.

1992

- DCE becomes the Department of **Conservation and Natural Resources** (CNR).

1993

- The management of Victoria's 0.2 million hectares of publicly owned plantations moves from CNR to a separate corporation (the **Victorian Plantations Cooperation** – VPC).

1995

- **Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land:**
 - CNR develops Australia's first Code of Practice for Fire Management. The Code provides a comprehensive framework for fire management procedures and practices on public land in Victoria. Its innovative approach attracts international attention.
 - In accordance with the requirements of the Code the document is subsequently reviewed and a *Revision No. 1* is released in early 2006. A further revision is released in mid-2012, in the wake of *Black Saturday*.

1996

- CNR becomes the Department of **Natural Resources and Environment** (NRE)
- **Parks Victoria** is established to manage, on behalf of NRE, national parks, conservation reserves and related assets.

1998

- NRE and Parks Victoria launch a joint, several year initiative, to lift the understanding across both agencies, and in the wider community, of the role fire plays in the conservation of biodiversity.
- VPC is privatised and its assets sold to *Hancock Victorian Plantations Pty Ltd* (HVP). While the Crown retains ownership of the land, HVP has the right to harvest the trees on that land.
- **Elvis arrives:**

As part of the continuing development of aerial fire-fighting operations an Erikson Airplane heavy-lift helicopter (nick-named 'Elvis') is contracted for fire-fighting duties by NRE / CFA. It can accurately deliver large loads (around 9,000 litres) of water or retardant.

2000

- **First deployment of Australian fire fighters to assist in overseas fire control efforts:**

Forty-nine NRE fire fighters form part of a 98-person contingent from Australia and New Zealand that travels to the U.S. to assist with wildfire suppression in Idaho and Montana.
- **Fireweb** developed:

Using State government initiative funding NRE dramatically upgrades the IT platform that underpins its fire management functions. *Fireweb* provides a single source and repository of fire related information using features that have subsequently been adapted for use in many parts of the world.

2001/2002

- State Aircraft Unit formed as a joint DSE/Country Fire Authority initiative.

2002

- **Linton Coronial Inquiry concludes:**
 - Following the deaths of five CFA Geelong West volunteer firefighters at a CFA/NRE managed bushfire south west of Ballarat, in December 1998, the Victorian Coroner conducts what becomes, at the time, the longest running Coronial Inquest in Australia's history. The Inquest commenced in July 2000, sat for 98 days during a ten-month period and heard from 95 witnesses;
 - Investigations conducted by NRE and the CFA immediately after the Linton tragedy were to result in major changes to the way the two agencies conducted joint operations and to the implementation, by the CFA, of mandatory training and accreditation programs for all its fire fighters.
- NRE becomes the Department of **Sustainability and Environment** (DSE).

2002 – 2003

- **The Victorian Alpine Fires:**

The Victorian Bushfires of 2002 – 03, and those in the NSW and the ACT, were started by lightning strikes from dry thunderstorms that swept south-eastern Australia at the end of a ten-year long drought. A lightning event on the evening of the 7th of January, 2003 started 80 fires in Victoria and 40 in NSW and the ACT. In Victoria, most fires were in remote, heavily forested parts of the North-East and Gippsland and took 60 days to contain. They burnt well over 1 million hectares of land, and saw the first deployments of overseas crews to assist Australian bushfire efforts (New Zealand and U.S. crews joined those from several Australian states). In a flash flood at the end of the fires a DSE fire fighter tragically drowns.

2003

- **Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires:**

The Victorian Government instigates an inquiry into the management of the 2002 – 03 Victorian fires that is conducted by the State's Emergency Services Commissioner. The Inquiry considers the preparedness and response to the fires and provides recommendations for the future of bushfire management in Victoria.
- A committee of Australia's **House of Representatives** delivers a report titled *A Nation Charred: Inquiry into the Recent Australian Bushfires*.
- The **Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre** is formed. It involves all the fire and land management agencies in Australia and New Zealand, CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology, the federal Attorney-General's Department and several other fire related organisations. A small executive office is located in East Melbourne. Funding comes via both the federal government and member agencies.

2004

- **VicForests** established to manage commercial timber harvesting on public land.

- The **Council of Australian Governments** releases the first national report on *Bushfire Mitigation and Management in Australia*.

2006/2007

- **The Victorian Great Divide Fires:** December 2006 – February 2007:
 - Much of Victoria has been experiencing drought conditions since 1996. Intense lightning ignites around 80 fires across central Gippsland and north-east Victoria. Because of resourcing constraints a number of these fires burn unchecked for several days and these, and other fires that had not been contained ultimately coalesce and burn around 5% of Victoria over a 69-day period (some 1.113 million hectares).
 - As with the 2003 fires assistance is again received from interstate and overseas crews.

2008

- A Victorian Parliamentary Committee concludes an Inquiry into the *Impact of Public Land Management Practices on Bushfires in Victoria*.

2009

- **Black Saturday – 7th February:**
 - By February 2009 much of south-eastern Australia is experiencing a severe and protracted drought that, in some places had extended over twelve years.
 - Late morning on February 7th a fire, which is believed to have started from a faulty electricity supply line, is reported on farmland about 60 km. north of Melbourne (near the town of Kilmore). At the time the temperature is in the mid to high 30s°C and climbing toward the 40s, a northerly winds was gusting up to 90 km/h. and the humidity was approaching single figures. The fire spreads quickly, soon entering forested country on its way to the northern edge of Melbourne.
 - As afternoon approaches many fires are reported across the State.
 - Early that afternoon a fire is reported in open country to the east of Melbourne, in Gippsland, again being driven, under strong north winds, towards forested hills.
 - Around 3 PM a fire is reported to the north-east of Melbourne (near Murrindindi) again in farmland but close to forest. Initially arriving crews report severe fire behaviour, with flames 20 metres high and an estimated rate of spread of 8 kilometres per hour. ‘Spotting’ was estimated at 5 kilometres (post-fire analysis indicates this was an under-estimate — the likely spread of the fire was around 12 kilometres per hour with spotting to 22 kilometres).
 - A little after midday a strong, gusty, south-westerly wind change enters the State dropping temperatures and increasing relative humidity. No shower activity is associated with the change. Many locations have now reported, if not their hottest day on record, then their hottest for February. Wind gusts to 115 kilometres per hour are reported in the wake of the change. The strong and gusty south-westerly wind change moves eastward at a rate of about 30 kilometres per hour. Fire danger ratings remains well into the ‘Extreme’ category ahead of the wind change, and in

central parts of the State these do not drop below 'Extreme' until up to an hour after the change.

- By the time the fires that broke out on February 7th have been contained 173 people have been killed, around 78 communities have been directly impacted upon and several entire towns have been irrevocably affected. More than 2000 homes and sixty-one business premises have been destroyed, and 430,000 hectares of land have been burnt. The fires are Australia's deadliest peace-time disaster.
- In the weeks following the tragedy the State government establishes a Royal Commission of Inquiry that is required to produce an interim report by 17 August 2009, and a final report by 31 July 2010.
- During the life of the Inquiry the Commission receives over 1700 written submissions, and examines some 434 witnesses and a range of international specialists over 155 days.

2009/10 fire season

- A U.S. based converted, wide-body passenger McDonnell Douglas DC-10 aircraft is trialled for bushfire suppression in remoter areas. The former airliner carries up to 43,500 litres of water or fire retardant in a series of exterior belly-mounted tanks, the contents of which can be released in eight seconds. An evaluation conducted by the Bushfire CRC concluded that the aircraft had '...limited effectiveness and presented some clear safety issues...'

2010

- July 31st - The **2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission** delivers its final report. The report includes some 67 recommendations and covers around 1000 pages.
- A Committee of the **Australian Senate** releases a report on the *Incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia*.
- State parliament passes a *Fire Services Commissioner Act 2010* to provide for the appointment, powers, and functions of a Fire Services Commissioner, and amends Victoria's emergency management arrangements to create a State Fire Controller to response to major fires.

2010-11 fire season

- Two Convair CV580 fire-fighting aircraft, on a 12-week lease from Canada, conduct a series of trial drops to test the aircraft's capability over a variety of terrains, including forested areas. Again a Bushfire CRC review is conducted.

2011

- Bill Gammage publishes his seminal book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. (Allen and Unwin).

2012-13 fire season

- Large fires again burn in the Victorian Alps, originating at Harrietville, and around Aberfeldy. Two DSE fire-fighters are killed during the Harrietville fire when a tree falls on their vehicle.
- An Inquiry, by the State's Emergency Services Commissioner, is launched into the management of the first two 72 hours of the Harrietville fire after widespread local criticism and very high aircraft-related costs being borne.

2013

- In February, the federal government announces a \$47 million contribution, over eight years, to help establish a **Bushfires and Natural Hazards CRC**, to begin on 1 July 2013. As the Bushfire CRC completes its current program of research, the new CRC lays the foundations of a new research agenda.
- DSE merges with the Department of Primary Industries to become the Department of **Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI)**.

2015

- The **Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)** is formed from the former Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI), the former Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure (DTPLI) and the former, Department of State Development, Business and Innovation.

Public land fire responsibility in Victoria – a brief summary

A **State Forests Department** was established in Victoria in 1908. In 1918 the **Forests Commission, Victoria (FCV)** was formed to administer the relevant legislation and to manage the Department. From the outset a key requirement of the Department / Commission was to meet:

'...The need for an effective fire prevention and fire suppression organisation...'

Responsibility for the relevant legislation lay with the *Forests Commission* until 1983. In that year the FCV was effectively incorporated into a new body, the **Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (CF+L)**. That organisation's successors in law have been the Departments of:

- 1990: **Conservation and Environment (DCE)**;
- 1992: **Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR)**;
- 1996: **Natural Resources and Environment (NRE)**;
- 2002: **Sustainability and Environment (DSE)**;
- 2013: **Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI)**; and
- 2015: **Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)**

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