

Media Release



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VFF Submission to Federal and State Bushfire inquiries calls for sensible fuel management

The Victorian Farmers Federation has provided a detailed report to the Federal Government's Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the Victorian Government's Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Bushfire Season.

VFF President David Jochinke said the 2019-2020 bushfire season had a wide ranging and devastating effect on the agricultural sector with an estimated economic impact of \$325 million.

"SGS Economics and Planning estimated that East Gippsland alone suffered a 22.6 per cent drop in GDP which is three times higher than the national figure," Mr Jochinke said.

"It is critical that we interrogate our preparedness for this bushfire season, identify opportunities for improvement and follow through with meaningful action because the impact of these fires on farmers has been shattering.

"The VFF's submission outlines a range of factors that significantly diminished our bushfire readiness and preparedness including fuel load build up and inadequate active land management.

"We are seeing inconsistent regulations around management of fuel risk, especially where a farm property intersects with public land. Equally concerning, there is an increasing financial burden on farmers with responsibility for fire mitigation being transferred to them including creating expensive fire breaks on private rather than public land."

The submission demands sensible regulation of fuel management zones throughout farm properties. This approach would see these zones extend beyond the family home and include sheds, dairies, livestock sheds and other critical farming infrastructure.

"In a city or peri-urban context, emergency services are understandably focussed on the family home as being a significant property asset; that is not always the case on a farm where there is livestock and other infrastructure that may be more valuable than the family home and often is irreplaceable," Mr Jochinke said.

"Ultimately, there must be a collaborative and constructive approach with Government at all levels including sensible and, where possible, nationally consistent regulation that protects farmers, their property, agricultural land, state and national parks."

A summary of the VFF submission is included in the following pages.

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VFF Submission Summary

The Victorian Farmers Federation propose a three step approach to mitigating impact of fire:
Avoid. Minimise. Support/assist.

Avoid

Fuel load management / risk reduction is a key tool in avoiding the likelihood of a fire that is uncontrollable. Risk assessment needs to be undertaken to assess impact on all elements of 'property' and accurate data on all agricultural losses collected and modelled.

The following actions should be implemented:

1. At the end of the fire season – commence Mapping of in and above ground farm infrastructure, dairy sheds, intensive livestock sheds, stock containment yards and machinery sheds. This will assist incident controllers plan how best to reduce impact of fires on economic production and where a bushfire has occurred, accurate data on all agricultural losses should be collected and modelled.
2. A permanent working group, including VFF, should be created to ensure impacts on agriculture are considered in all stages of emergency management.
3. The State establish a strategy to ensure sufficient fire breaks and containment lines within public parks and around public land to improve fire suppression and prevent private land being unnecessarily damaged during a bushfire event.
4. Relatedly, the State Government prioritises roadside fuel reduction and engage local landholders to identify roadside areas requiring fuel reduction.
5. There is ample evidence which supports the role of cool, slow burns, hazard reduction in supporting ecological communities and sustaining balanced biodiversity outcomes.

Minimise

Fuel management and strategic planning / knowledge are key elements of minimising impact. Ensuring timely access to good information is critical for incident control.

The following actions should be implemented:

1. Designate all farming land adjacent to crown land reserves greater than 10ha as 'asset protection zone' and ensure mineral earth breaks are permanently maintained within crown land.
2. Ensure all fuel reduction plans minimise impact on areas of agricultural production.
3. Amend Victoria Planning Provisions to ensure fuel breaks and safe management of vegetation along roadsides and fence lines.
4. Map agricultural areas – type of production; key locations / assets; nature of systems (e.g. dairy power type) and ensure emergency management plans minimise impacts on farm businesses.



VFF Submission Summary

5. Land access agreements should be developed with framers such that there is clear understanding of what disruption there may be to the farmer's property in the event of a fire necessitating control actions (e.g. containment lines).
6. Ensure Agriculture Victoria presence in State Control Centre / Incident Control Centre during events impacting agricultural areas and agriculture industry membership on municipal fire prevention committees.
7. Establish evacuation areas with bio secure holding facilities (such as showgrounds) where landholders may transport key breeding stock.
8. The State should require telecommunication providers to monitor their infrastructure and maintain active service to rural communities during high risk bushfire periods.

Support / Assist

It is important for farming communities to have information available as well as a dedicated resources that know their issues and assists through a streamlined and cost effective approvals system.

The following actions should be implemented:

1. Expedited access for local Vets and animal health staff to assist farmers to care for livestock and animals affected by the fires.
2. The State should pay the full cost of fire control line rehabilitation where a control line was established by government agencies. The State should share the burden of cost in replacing boundary fencing, public and private landowners on adjoining properties should be treated equally in terms of paying for fencing under the Fencing Act 1968, particularly after the devastation of a bushfire event.
3. Assistance in establishing stock feed depots (where required), established channels with Defence for emergency generators, access to 'banks' to store genetic material to facilitate recovery post loss of seed / breeding stock.
4. Dedicated website (that remains live for an extended period of time) with resourcing information for the recovery and rebuilding phase with information about Site clearance; rebuilding advice; Agriculture advice – recovery; financial and other assistance; Links to resources and Community information.
5. Dedicated 'recovery' co-ordinator – maintaining regular contact / newsletters etc. & organising community sessions with speakers. The coordinator would be responsible for delivery of targeted information packages on how to regenerate your pasture, feeding quantities for stock etc. with outreach contacts / resources at DEDJTR.

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