

LOGGING AND BUSHFIRE DANGER

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The corporate timber lobby wants to secure long term contracts to experiment with logging and burning Australian native forests to make fuel and energy. Claims that heavy logging, 'thinning' and burning forests, (national parks included) lessens fire risk, are being used in an attempt to increase access to national forest resources. These claims are dangerously misleading and to adopt them as a means of fire prevention would enhance the danger to many Australians and their homes from fires.

Australian bushfire danger is increasing as a consequence of climate changes predicted by scientists.¹

The benefit of logging and burning to prevent fire has long been debated. Now, studies of the most recent and severe Australian bushfires indicate that they burn faster and often hotter through already cleared, logged and/or frequently burnt areas. The loss of the mature protective canopy of a forest exposes it to drying out by wind and sun. Species sensitive to moisture loss and fire are eventually lost as forests become tinderboxes of fire tolerant species that readily burn.

On the other hand, forests in their natural state with dense shading canopies and intact boundaries lose less moisture from drying wind and direct sun. An unlogged forest can remain cooler and damper for longer, can slow, and even halt a fire.²



Fires will spread rapidly through regrowth of these heavily logged and frequently burnt NSW state forests

Our Forests are Becoming 'Factories'

Native forests are not a 'renewable' energy source as that term relates to minimizing CO₂ emissions. They sink more carbon alive and maturing than dead.³ Burning or cutting trees releases CO₂ or prevents its maximum absorption.

The dead products of forests are neither eligible nor suitable as a carbon trading commodity.

Protected, our forests are indispensable - our best land-based carbon sink, the (only) home of most of our wildlife, and of immense economic value as a perpetual carbon offset, i.e. as an intact unmodified living

ecosystem. Corporatized former public forestry departments are accountable to investors. It is the vested interest of those managing and investing in forest resources to gain maximum access. For this they need to overturn an existing ban on native forest 'biomass' being deemed a renewable energy source. If they can manipulate this outcome they can subsidize experiments in burning and logging native forests for energy or fuel production,⁴ because renewable energy attracts carbon credits.

Subsidised long term contracts (20-30 years) to native forest resources would place international corporations in a financially powerful position. They could gain carbon credits for 'renewable' energy production if made legal, or gain carbon credits later for ceasing such operations and leaving the carbon sink to re-grow with policy reversals. Either way corporations profit, not the Australian public. Thus the 'no holds barred' attempt to use the threat of fire to convince the public and the government to surrender our rights to our intact carbon sink, our native forests. That trees re-grow, and the myth that more logging and burning will prevent bushfire, is investor spin to gain access to exploit Australian native forests. It ignores the reality that cutting and burning them for carbon trading is a total corruption of the concept, which was to prevent, not cause, the release of CO₂ into the atmosphere.



Native forests left to recover, capturing carbon, closing canopies, creating shade and cooling all below

Logging 'forest biomass' to make fuels or burn for energy means:

- clear felling and almost total forest ecosystem sterilization
- promoting re-growth trees with a diameter of 20 cm or less, convenient for pulp or fuel products
- forsaking the species mix needed by wildlife
- creating perpetually immature forest landscapes without shading canopies or fire retarding species

Industrialized forests will burn on a scale and with a ferocity as yet unseen.

MYTHS & FACTS

Logging, 'thinning', frequent burning of forests is a fire risk
 Knowing the facts behind the myths helps you argue for the right of our native forests to be left alone, to re-grow their canopies and cool this continent.

Myth: Forests will be less prone to bushfire if regularly burnt.



Fact: 'On 7 February many areas of forest that had been treated with prescribed burns were still severely burnt because of the extreme conditions.'¹⁵ The Auditor General of Victoria⁶ found that prescribed burning is not a panacea against bushfire.



Myth: Locking up land creates fire because there's no fuel reduction.

Fact: Of five major inquiries into extreme fire events, the ACT Government,⁹ Federal Parliament House of Representatives,¹⁰ Victorian Auditor General¹¹ and Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet,¹² Victorian Legislative Council,¹³ all noted that fuel reduction burning is not a 'panacea' but one of many strategies that are used in combination to reduce fire risk. Also, none found that conservationists, 'the green vote' or the creation of National Parks has, in any way, influenced levels of fuel reduction burns on public land.

Myth: Ground and understorey vegetation creates bush fire risk.



Fact: There is evidence that fire spreads more readily in modified and disturbed vegetation. Heavily logged areas that have lost their vegetation strata and ecosystem function often have finer forest debris that easily ignites.



Myth: Logging native forests will reduce bush fires.

Fact: 43% of the burn area in the 2009 Victorian fires was logged state forests; only 23% was national parks.⁷

Myth: Conservation lands pose the greatest bushfire danger to the public.

Fact: Compare % of forestry land burnt to that of national park in Tasmania, 2013.⁸

Lake Repluse Fire

Nature conservation: 457.25ha, (4%),
Production forestry: 2129ha, (18%)
Plantation forestry: 581.5ha, (5%)

Forcett Fire

Nature conservation: 1638.25ha, (7%)
Production forestry: 5001.5ha, (21%)
Plantation forestry: 453.25ha, (2%)



Myth: Fires spread from national parks to other areas.

Fact: National parks have been a factor in preventing the spread of fire, e.g. the Churchill Fire, Victoria, 2009 effectively stopped at Tarra Bulga National Park.² Victorian fires within parks and protected areas (e.g. Wilson's Promontory and Mt Riddell in Yarra Ranges National Park) were mostly contained within National Parks.



What's your view?

NPA recognises that land management issues, particularly forestry and fire management, are complex subjects and are often the subject of robust debate. This article and the two preceding it present several perspectives on forest and bushfire management. We hope that they will stimulate thought and conversation.

If you would like to contribute your thoughts and experience on these subjects, we would love to hear from you in a letter to the editor. Please send your letter to editor@npansw.org.au