

PERSPECTIVE

Anti-conservationists refuse to accept the evidence

Blame game

SIMON BIRRELL

IT'S unhelpful that some people still wish to blame National Parks management and conservation groups for extreme wildfire events.

Richard de Fegley has once again claimed (GA, 10/7) that fuel reduction burns are not occurring in the Otways and conservation groups are opposed to such burns.

On February 18, 2009 I wrote the following:

"Over the past few years, extensive fire control work was conducted behind Lorne. The strategy is to create a massive firebreak to stop a fire burning from one end of the Otways to the other."

All the Otway fire suppression strategy information is publicly available, yet those pointing the finger conveniently ignore this.

The Otway fire suppression work to date has occurred in consultation with the broad community including environment groups and includes field trips organised by the DSE. Many members of the Otway Ranges Environment Network live in the Otways and want to see the forest made as fire safe as possible. Why would they not?

In autumn this year, a further 50sq km of public land behind Lorne was subjected to fuel reduction burns. Even so, the extensive fuel reduction program for the Otways is unlikely to halt an extreme fire similar to that experienced on Black Saturday.

Mr DeFegley is right to question why there may be an historical lack of fuel reduction burns. If the finger is to be pointed at anyone for a lack of fuel reduction burns in the past, then the facts clearly point at the native forest logging industry.

The Esplin Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian bushfires included an analysis of prescribed fires between 1991 and 2003. There are three types of prescribed burns:

FUEL reduction;
BURNING after clearfell logging to promote regrowth; and
BURNING for ecological purposes.

The Esplin Inquiry found that the number of burns conducted after logging dominated, representing an



A Department of Sustainability and Environment worker supervising work on a controlled fuel reduction burn.

'A challenge to David Koch, can he name any tracks that have been closed? He will fail this challenge as no tracks have been closed.'

average of 63 per cent of prescribed burns each year compared with 33 per cent for fuel reduction.

However the average area burnt each year due to logging is tiny at only two per cent compared with 90 per cent for fuel reduction burns. Why? The average size of each

logging burn is 24ha compared with 700ha for each fuel reduction burn.

There are only very limited days available to safely conduct fuel reduction burns, and a limited pool of qualified personnel to undertake this dangerous work.

The inquiry found that the limited resources to conduct all forms of prescribed burns have historically been diverted away from fuel reduction and ecological burns in order to prioritise post-logging burns.

The ban on logging in the Otways removes this competition for prescribed burning resources, and is a reason why extra financial resources are not needed to get the job done. (GA, No Money To Burn Otways, 10/7/09).

A logging ban also reduces wildfire risks in other ways. Department of Sustainability and Environment's own data shows that over the past

two decades at least one in 20 wildfires have been connected with logging industry practices.

This is predominately fires escaping from logging coupe burn-offs, and fires started by logging machinery exhausts and chainsaws.

Finally, a challenge to Western Victoria MLA David Koch who claimed in Friday's *Geelong Advertiser* that access tracks, presumably to fight fires, had been closed since the Great Otway National Park was created. Can Mr Koch name any tracks that have been closed? He will fail this challenge as no tracks have been closed. Instead, previously overgrown tracks have now been reopened to assist fire management.

■ Simon Birrell is spokesman for the Otway Ranges Environmental Network. These comments formed part of a submission by the OREN to the royal commission into Black Saturday bushfires.