

Forget political scapegoats, greenies not to blame

Fire defences

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ON Saturday February 7, about 2.30pm, a southerly weather change began to move through the Otways, removing a howling northerly blast furnace wind. There was collective sigh of relief. The Otway communities had escaped a potential inferno.

In the days that followed, we discovered the horror and tragedy of what could have happened to communities in the Otways. All Australians are now looking for answers and solutions to ensure the Black Saturday tragedy never occurs again.

Unfortunately some people have been very quick to use the inferno disaster as an opportunity to scapegoat greens or those who go after Greens preferences as a means to push their own political ideology.

Let's deal with facts. It is simply not true, as claimed by Richard de Fegely (GA, 14/2), that the Department of Sustainability and Environment has not been building fire control lines and conducting fuel reduction burns in the Otways.

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 off the Otways to the other. In 2007, fire control lines were constructed at Garvey, Sharps and Delaney roads. Then in autumn last year, an area well over 10 square km was control burnt to remove fuel loads.

To fully implement the fire suppression strategy more control burns are planned, when it is safe to do so.

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, including 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?

It is irresponsible to create a false scene of security that control burns and fire breaks would have stopped



Despite claims to the contrary, Department of Sustainability and Environment fuel reduction burns have been held in the Otways.

'It is irresponsible to create a false scene of security that control burns and fire breaks would have stopped the inferno that happened on Black Saturday'

the inferno that happened on Black Saturday, a fire that was crowning (burning through trees tops), and spotting was occurring kilometres ahead of the fire front.

In 1977, I witnessed the aftermath of a disastrous fire at Streatham in

western Victoria. It destroyed the town, killing residents. It did not burn any forest, just miles of paddocks. So who is the "greenie" scapegoat for that tragic fire?

The claim has been made that the removal of Otways native forest logging will make fire worse. The extensive area burnt on Black Saturday included some of the most intensively clearfell logged native forest in Australia. The presence of a native forest logging industry made no difference given the circumstances.

The same would be true for the Otways. During consultation sessions run by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council during its Otway investigation, the CFA representative said the presence or otherwise of logging makes no difference in extreme fire events. However, that needs to be reviewed. It may be the case that the inferno

that tragically destroyed Marysville was exacerbated by the extensive areas of dense regrowth that established after clearfell logging of native forest around Marysville. The royal commission will need to examine whether clearfell logging practices intensified the fire storm.

Logging extensive plantations in the Otways will continue for many years. As recently as last summer, logging equipment behind Skenes Creek caused a fire that destroyed that equipment and burnt four hectares of dense bush. Native forest logging was also a common source of fire. Plantation logging on private land needs to be more regulated to help prevent a fire disaster in the Otways.

See www.oren.org.au for information about Otways fire suppression strategies used by DSE.

■ Simon Birrell is spokesman for the Otway Ranges Environment Network.