

# DSE Land & Fire Management

## What are Planned Burns?



Planned burns are planned, controlled fires that are ignited on public land. In Victoria they are carried out in parks, forests and reserves across the state.

Planned burns have a number of purposes. They help protect communities in high bushfire-risk areas. Burns are used to protect assets including vital water catchments and important infrastructure such as power lines.

Many ecosystems in Victoria are also dependant on fire to maintain their health and regenerate.

### **How do planned burns reduce bushfire risk?**

Planned burns do not prevent bushfires. However, fire is the strongest tool available to reduce the threat of severe bushfires to life, property and the environment.

In forests planned burns are used to remove dry leaves, twigs, shrubs and some bark. In other environments they are used to reduce the amount of grasses and shrubs. This lowers the amount of fuel available for a bushfire and can reduce its speed, intensity and ability to cause spot fires. By changing the amount of fuel, planned burns break up the landscape and prevent bushfires spreading across large areas.

A less intense bushfire is easier and safer for firefighters to contain while the fire is still small and also assists residents to successfully defend their properties. An area where a planned burn has been carried out can also provide a safe place for firefighters to conduct a backburn when suppressing a bushfire.

### **A natural part of the Victorian environment**

Victorian is one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world. Over tens of thousands of years, fires caused by lightning and fires ignited by Indigenous burning practices have shaped Victoria's ecosystems.

# What are Planned Burns?

Fires were more frequent and removed much of the fuel that built up each season, leading to bushfires that were smaller, less intense and more scattered. This provided a diverse landscape made up of many small patches that burnt at different times and at different intensities, rather than one very large area affected by a single, intense fire.

Numerous plant species adapted to these recurring events and now need fire to regenerate, either by reshooting or sprouting from seed. As a result, many ecosystems in Victoria rely on bushfires to regenerate natural vegetation and to maintain ecosystem health.

Many species of native animals rely on fire-regenerated plants for their food supply and benefit from regular lower intensity fire events. In the past, patches of vegetation that burnt at lower intensities provided important refuges for animals.

The occurrence of infrequent, large and severe bushfires rather than frequent, smaller, dispersed and less intense fires, has resulted in an imbalance of fire and created less diversity across habitats and landscapes.

## **The changing fire threat**

In Victoria many more people are now living in areas where bushfires occur. A vital part of protecting people and property has been preventing bushfires and quickly suppressing fires that occur. As a consequence, most fires are now controlled when still small - the vast majority of fires in Victoria are successfully contained when they are less than five hectares in size.

This has meant that for many ecosystems in Victoria, the length of time between fires has increased. Some parts of Victoria that once burnt naturally every ten to twenty years have remained unburnt for over fifty years. This has allowed dense leaf litter, twigs, shrubs and bark to build up. In some parts of Victoria the amount of fuel is higher than ever seen before. This has increased the risk of more severe bushfires that burn larger areas.

There is also a direct link between drought, increased fire activity and more intense fire behaviour. Current drought conditions create more hot, windy days that dry out fuels. Fires during drought conditions are likely to be larger, more intense and harder to control.

The last decade has seen a significant and unnatural increase in the number, intensity and impact of bushfires in Victoria – these include the 2003 Alpine Fires, the 2006/07 Great Divide Fires and the devastating fires of Black Saturday in February 2009.

## **Introducing planned fire**

The Department of Sustainability and Environment uses planned burns to introduce fire back into the Victorian landscape. DSE manages fire on 7.7 million hectares of public land in Victoria, including parks, forests and reserves. Planned burns are the only practical, broad scale land management tool that can achieve the ecological benefits of fire, as well as reducing fuels.

## What are Planned Burns?

Natural fire patterns vary widely across Victoria. In the past, drier areas, such as the Mallee and coastal heath may have burnt naturally each year, while wetter forests, including the Central Highlands and the Otway Ranges, burnt less frequently, usually following long periods of drought.



Planned burns are designed to recreate natural fire patterns as much as possible. Planned burns are usually distributed across the landscape in a patchwork to mimic natural fire patterns and to break up the amount of fuel in the landscape. Where possible DSE matches the timing of planned burns, their intensity and frequency to the needs of significant plant and animal species.

### **Why are burns being conducted now?**

Each year it is vital that key planned burns are carried out. However, planned burning is completely weather dependent.

Winter is usually too cold and wet for burns to be successful. Summer conditions are too hot, dry and windy, and fire behaviour too extreme to control most burns. Spring, and particularly autumn, have cooler, stable weather, and fuels are not too wet to burn. There are only a limited number of days each season that are suitable and DSE must make use of every opportunity. In some locations, there may be only a few suitable days each autumn.

Wherever possible, burns are conducted outside key visitor periods to reduce impact on visitors and the tourism industry. Community consultation is a key element to our planned burning program and we work with the community wherever possible when timing burns. However, with limited opportunities to burn, sometimes burns will occur during weekends and over public holidays.

# What are Planned Burns?

Although conducting burns is vital work in reducing bushfire risk and protecting communities and must be done when it can, DSE understands that they can be unpleasant and affect communities.

DSE thanks the public for their tolerance and patience during these necessary activities.



## How can I find out about planned burns in my area?

Where possible DSE works closely with the community to ensure locals are consulted and informed about planned burns in their area so that they can take action and be prepared.

DSE's website is a useful source of information about the status of all burns planned on public land in Victoria. Each upcoming burn is listed along with its purpose, location and approximate size. The status of burns is also given. Any messages about smoke or other impacts such as changes to local traffic conditions are included.

The progress of the annual planned burning program is updated on the DSE website. The Victorian Bushfire Information Line can provide this same information - 1800 240 667

## Is that a planned burn or a fire?

You may want to know if flames or smoke from a bushfire in your area or from a DSE planned burn. It is important that you know where to access this information quickly.

You can find out about DSE planned burns that have been ignited by;

- listening to your local ABC radio station
- visiting [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires) and select 'Burns Today'
- calling the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667 (callers who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech/communication impairment call textphone/ telewriter (TTY) on 1800 122 969)

Please note that private landholders also undertake burns - these burns are not covered in the information sources above.

If you are still unsure if a fire is a planned burn or a bushfire, call the emergency services on 000.

## Delays with planned burns

You may be notified about an upcoming burn in your area that is then postponed. Although this can be frustrating for you, a planned burn will not be carried out if conditions are not suitable. The final decision to carry out a burn will not be made until site assessments have been completed on the actual day of ignition.

## What are Planned Burns?

In other situations a large burn may be ignited but only partially completed, with the remainder of the burn postponed. It is for these reasons that the number of completed burns can be less than the number planned.

DSE aims to complete as many priority burns as possible – if opportunity is limited, high priority burns, such as fuel reduction burns which provide community protection, may be carried out ahead of other burns.

You can check the status of any DSE planned burn by visiting the DSE website at [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires) or call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line 1800 240 667.

### **There is some risk**

Conducting planned burns is a complex and difficult process. Every precaution is taken to ensure the safety of your local community, your property and our firefighters during burns.

Planned burning is inherently risky, with operations constrained by weather and the need to protect natural and built assets. Planned burns are conducted when weather conditions are suitable and fire danger is low. These risks need to be weighed against the known and significant anticipated consequences from future severe bushfires.

Each burn has an authorised burn plan developed prior to the burn being carried out. The conditions, or prescriptions, for that burn plan must be met before the burn proceeds. Detailed assessments of conditions including fuel moisture, air humidity, air temperature, wind speed and wind direction are carried out before ignition.

If conditions are suitable the burn is ignited and monitored by trained firefighters using specialised equipment. Firefighters also patrol over the following days and weeks until the burn is declared under control.

Firefighters respond quickly to any spread of a burn beyond control lines. If a planned burn spreads significantly it will be declared a fire. The public can access updates through local ABC radio, the Victorian Bushfire Information Line and at [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires)



# What are Planned Burns?

## Road travel during planned burns

Traffic management may be in place during burns near roads, or if smoke affects visibility when driving.

Take care when driving near burns and watch out for fire agency staff and vehicles working in the area. Motorists driving in smoky areas should slow down and use their headlights.



## Smoke

Smoke is an unavoidable consequence of planned burns. Although this smoke is usually less than smoke from more intense bushfires, it can still impact you and your family.

Wherever possible, DSE will inform communities about significant smoke and when it is likely to clear.

If you are affected by smoke delay vigorous exercise, remain inside if possible, keep windows closed and stay informed.

## Where is the smoke coming from?

Planned burns are mostly conducted in autumn and spring when the weather conditions are suitable. If you see or smell smoke in your area during this period it could be from a planned burn. DSE's planned burning program is entirely weather dependant. Burns are often lit in calm stable weather conditions - unfortunately this means that smoke can linger for several days until winds strengthen and carry it away.



As smoke can drift long distances, it can sometimes be difficult to determine exactly where smoke in your area may be coming from. Call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667. Or check the DSE 'Burns Today' web page, which has a list of all the burns lit on public land.

If there is not a burn in your area check the weather forecast to see if the wind is causing smoke to drift from another area. Remember: smoke may be coming from burns on private land.

# What are Planned Burns?

## **How long will the smoke last?**

The length of time smoke hangs in the air is dependant on the weather conditions. If there is no wind it is likely that smoke could hang in the air for several days. You can also predict when the smoke will clear is by looking at your local weather forecast to see when there is likely to be more wind.

## **Air quality**

Smoke from planned burns may temporarily affect air quality in the surrounding areas. The Victorian EPA provides hourly air quality updates for the urban areas of Melbourne. For other areas of Victoria the EPA has developed a self assessment table to help you assess the air quality in your area. This is available at the EPA website at [www.epa.vic.gov.au](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

## **Health Information about Smoke**

The Department of Human Services advises that people with pre-existing heart or lung conditions should take their medication as prescribed. In particular, people with asthma should follow their asthma management program. If you are experiencing any symptoms that may be due to smoke exposure, seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

For general information about how smoke from fires potentially affects health, and precautions to take to reduce exposure, visit the DHS website at [www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)

For more information about asthma management in smoky conditions visit The Asthma Foundation of Victoria website at [www.asthma.org.au](http://www.asthma.org.au)

Information on fires or planned burns in Victoria and general fire safety, can also be obtained from the DSE's website at [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires) and from the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on freecall 1800 240 667. Callers who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech/communication impairment may call textphone/telewriter (TTY) on 1800 122 969.

## **Other bushfire management activities**

In addition to planned burns other methods are also used to manage fire on public land. These include vegetation slashing, track maintenance and the creation of strategic fuelbreaks.

Since the Great Divide fires of 2006-7 strategic fuelbreaks have been constructed in Victoria, in particular around Melbourne's water catchments and along the coast in the Otway Ranges. These save critical firefighting time spent constructing new fuelbreaks during a bushfire. They also increase firefighter safety by providing a safer location from which to fight bushfires. DSE, in conjunction with Parks Victoria, manage approximately 40,000km of roads and tracks on public land across Victoria. This includes slashing the verges on some public land tracks.

## **Have your say about planned burns**

When proposing new burns, staff use a sound base of local knowledge and science to identify burns that will provide reduction of fuel loads, maximum protection for townships and ecological benefits.

## What are Planned Burns?

Each winter DSE and Parks Victoria staff consult the community about fire management activities, including planned burns. These activities are identified in rolling three year Fire Operations Plans. The plans outline proposed fire management activities in each fire district, including planned burns, strategic fuelbreaks and slashing works.

Community members, fire agencies and other interested groups are invited to work with DSE in planning these activities. This includes discussing the type and purpose of proposed planned burns, when burns will occur, their size and location.

DSE encourages you to contribute to the fire management process. In response to community input, new burns and other proposed fire management works that are nominated by the community can be included, or proposed plans modified, where possible.

Once the fire operations plan is finalised for each district, you can view a hardcopy of the plan at your local DSE or Parks Victoria office – the plans include maps that show the location of each burn proposed.

You can also access the DSE website to download printable PDF maps of proposed burns. Or visit [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires) to view online interactive maps showing the burns planned in each fire district.

In addition to the formal consultation process you can contact DSE throughout the year regarding any aspects of fire management planning. To have your say about fire operations plans and to get involved in fire planning;

- Visit your local DSE or Parks Victoria office to speak to fire management staff.
- Call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667
- Visit the DSE website [www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires)



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