

Graeme Walker

Thursday, September 20, 2018

I wish to make comments and ask questions regarding a number of points on the recommendation to redesignate the Cobaw State Forest as a conservation park.

I note some of the rationale in your draft proposals paper for your recommendation, but have some real concerns over the impact and any potential benefit.

Having experienced the brunt of the 2015 “controlled burn” bushfire, I have serious doubts about the capacity of the Department of Environment, Lands, Water & Planning to manage the public land in the Cobaws, and query the current status of the EVCs that you list in your report.

My property was on the immediate eastern boundary of the 2015 controlled burn, and almost all of my property was burned right out in the bushfire.

My property address is _____, and the property comprises three contiguous titles -

The whole of the combined property comprises some 550 acres (222 hectares), all of which except approximately 50 acres is regrowth native forest.

Our western boundary – _____ section – shared a common boundary of approximately 2 kilometres with the area designated for DELWP’s controlled burn.

The planned burn broke through containment lines on both October 3 and October 6. I understand that my property was the only one in the bushfire area which was affected by both breakouts.

A small spot fire burned out about a quarter-acre in my bottom paddock on October 3. A fire crew put a dozer track around this burn on that day. This fire also broke out again on the Tuesday and burned more of my bottom paddock.

My property was the first private land impacted when the main fire jumped containment lines on October 6, pushed by strong westerly and north-westerly winds.

The fire burned right across my property, and subsequent inspections confirmed that virtually all of the native bush had been destroyed. Ground cover was denuded.

We sustained significant property and equipment damage. We managed to protect our shack, caravans, main shed and trailers, but our losses included tractors, cars, a bulldozer, a large shed full of firewood, fencing and a significant resource of dry wood in the forest which was earmarked as the ongoing source for our firewood cutting and selling operation.

The only area of native forest that was not fully impacted was an area of about 30 acres which was burned in a January 2014 lightning strike. Parts of this area sustained moderate to medium fire damage on the Tuesday of the 2015 fire.

Our whole western side shares a common boundary with the State forest, as do all our northern boundaries. As such, we are well placed to observe the lack of maintenance carried out by DELWP in the native forest, and have done so for more than a quarter of a century.

In my view this lack of maintenance contributed to the 2015 bushfire, in terms of allowing the accumulated build-up of litter on the forest floor. Having noted the Department's schedule of controlled burns on its website over a number of years, I am aware that its timetable of burning in the Cobaws had been meant to take place over three years. It did no work on the first two years, but rolled them all into one big burn on the third year, 2015, and we all know the catastrophic result.

How will the redesignation of the state forest as a conservation park improve management of the public land, when the track record shows minimal works over decades?

I note that part of your rationale for a Cobaw Conservation Park is to protect Ecological Vegetation Classes, specifically Herb-rich Foothill Forest and Valley Grassy Forest. I note also in your report that you relied on an assessment of the extent of these EVCs in the public forested area.

Again, having experienced first-hand the short cuts taken by the Department/its public land predecessors in mapping and analysis of EVCs, I seek a response from you on the background to your conclusions. Could you please advise whether you did your assessment of these EVCs based on a pre-fire desk audit, or on post-fire reality and on-ground inspections. I note that the maps available on your website indicate they were updated on October 20, 2015 – just two weeks after the controlled burn bushfire.

In terms of these short cuts, I reference a mid-90s timber harvesting application on my property. DELWP's predecessor agency recommended that one of my coupes, comprising some 37 hectares, be removed from the logging schedule due to its spatial mapping indicating that the coupe was predominantly Valley Grassy Forest.

The Department refused to consider my advice that its mapping was in error, and that the extent of the EVC was at best a hectare in the narrow confines of a gully, until directed by VCAT to review it in an on-ground inspection. That inspection confirmed my observations and the error of the mapping, and the Department had to amend its recommendation accordingly.

Please note that this small area of Valley Grassy Forest was obliterated in the 2015 controlled burn bushfire, never to return – replaced by a choking stand of wattle and the bracken, which has come back far thicker than before.

Interestingly, the maps on your website – which I presume are the ones on which you relied – show an even more extensive cover of Valley Grassy Forest on my property than the extent used by the Department in the 1990s. As per my advice above, the small patch of this EVC which existed pre-fire has been destroyed, so the map on your website is seriously in error.

The rest of my native forest area post-fire has been choked by a proliferation of bracken fern, which severely restricts the emergence of herbs and ground cover.

If the experience of my property is any indication, then the EVCs of Herb-rich Foothill Forest and Valley Grassy Forest on the public land in the Cobaws has probably also been severely impacted and at risk of not coming back.

I note that under your recommendations, designation of the Cobaw State Forest as a conservation park would prevent firewood collection.

There are already few areas in reasonable proximity to Lancefield where residents are permitted to collect firewood for domestic use, and this is a further reason for my concern over changing the designation to a conservation park.

Generations of local residents have collected their winter firewood supply from the Cobaws – admittedly some illegally.

I strongly support continued access to the public land area for collection of fallen timber for firewood, particularly given that the alternative is the build-up of fallen trees and limbs on the forest floor as a potential fire hazard.

The management response to this build-up is controlled burning. I support controlled burning as a forest management tool, provided it is done correctly. The independent investigation into the Lancefield burn identified multiple areas which did not follow the correct process. Given these shortcomings have been identified and the ensuing recommendations accepted, I would hope that future burns would be carried out appropriately.

I believe that the fallen trees and limbs should be made available for firewood in the period leading up to when a controlled burn is scheduled. The alternative to allowing it to be cut is for this wood to go up in smoke, so to speak.

There would still be enough litter and detritus on the forest floor to achieve a good burn and create a seed bed for regeneration, while allowing people to utilise some of the bigger timber for firewood. There are already restrictions on when and where the wood can be cut, and I'm satisfied that provides adequate protection for the other forest values.

Allowing people into the forest to collect firewood also ensures that they're keeping the tracks clear of fallen timber, improving access for recreational forest users and for our emergency services.

The Cobaw State Forest has been enjoyed by our community for well over a century for a range of uses and pursuits. Let's not lock it up and restrict community use when we already have appropriate measures in place to ensure that it can continue to be an asset for generations to come.

Graeme Walker.