



Nillumbik Pro Active Landowners (PALS)

SUBMISSION ON

Victorian Fire Management Strategy

VICTORIAN FIRE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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Organisation Name: Nillumbik PALS (Pro Active Landowners)

Level within organisation: Executive

Which of the categories below most applies to your organisation:

Other (please specify): Nillumbik PALS (Pro Active Landowners) is a community based group located within the Nillumbik Shire and represents the interests of, and advocates for, approximately 2000 residents/landowners. We have always been a community based, not-politically aligned and well-intentioned group who are now able to speak for the silent majority of otherwise neglected residents and landowners within our landscape, although the principles we advocate for have a far broader application across the State.

1. **What does fire management mean to you?**

The protection of human lives and property from fire. Including fire mitigation and protection works on public lands and roadsides, and the minimisation of fire risk on private land.

2. **What are your expectations of fire management now and into the future?**

To make all efforts to protect human lives and property, and to work with local communities to maximise fire prevention.

The expectation should be to emphasise the promotion and protection of human lives over and above the propensity for government departments or municipalities to place the environment first.

3. **Are we right to emphasise prevention?**

Yes.

4. **Does this future fire management system meet our future needs?**

There are major issues that need to be addressed, particularly in relation to peri-urban and rural areas, to re-assert the role of an expert body in relation to maintenance, management and authority over all fire related issues.

This could take the form of a revamped fire authority, currently in existence, an improved and legislatively empowered Emergency Management Agency or a new Fire Services Agency.

This "new" agency needs to have legislative control and be empowered to direct the relevant authority (for example, council or local CFA) and/or undertake fire maintenance works, roadside maintenance works, public land maintenance works and private land maintenance works.

Currently, there is a confusion of authorities in this space. The various Government departments (including DELWP, Parks Victoria), water and catchment management authorities, municipal councils, environmental/Landcare groups, CFA, MFB, green activist groups, VicRoads and others, result in a disjointed, fragmented, and in many cases, an ineffective approach to the whole issue of fire minimisation.

An umbrella agency to formulate and direct policy in this area would result in a more cohesive approach, provided the agency had appropriate legislative power.

Principles of a responsible Agency:

- Assert as its core principle the primacy of human life.

This principle needs to be predominant in all aspects of fire prevention, fire minimisation and maintenance works in relation to fire management on public and private land, as well as within road reserves.

- Assert as its secondary core principle the importance of proper bushland maintenance. It should play an active role in appropriate fire preventative works across road reserves and public land, as well as encouraging private landowners to undertake appropriate maintenance and fire minimisation works on their own land.

The Agency needs to have the resources and be empowered to deal directly with government agencies and municipal councils to direct that appropriate works be undertaken to ensure that core principles are maintained.

Of particular relevance currently is the lack of planning and inappropriate consequences of VicRoads works along road verges by the proliferation of road side barriers without any program to address the ongoing maintenance nightmares caused by the removal of or deprivation to access to the very road side areas in greatest need of that maintenance.

The Agency should be able to assist landowners in relation to private land maintenance by providing pertinent local advice (usually provided through the local CFA brigade resources). This could also include funding assistance to local CFA brigades to assist with cool burns under the control of the local CFA brigade on private land, direction that works should occur and provision of funding to municipal councils to be added to the existing financial resources in relation to their maintenance of road reserves.

The Agency needs to be proactive and innovative in tackling fire minimisation issues to deliver the best possible outcome for community safety, bushland survival, and the long term health of both flora and fauna. Nothing destroys like a catastrophic fire event. It should tackle the issue pro-actively and pre-emptively.

The Agency should;

- consult broadly with indigenous communities and leaders to better understand the burning techniques used across 10,000 years of indigenous environmental control;
- implement initiatives that reflect this successful management tool; and
- establish a working protocol in conjunction with indigenous representatives.

The end product of the sensible management of fire risk, incorporating an ongoing plan and execution of sensible cool burns, is the minimisation of fire risk.

Additional key recommendations in relation to the responsible Agency

- Remove the existing requirement for a planning permit from Municipal councils to undertake roadside maintenance and cool burns along road reserves. Municipal councils should be a referral authority, but not the body that has the power to grant or refuse permits in the space.

The Agency should be the principle arbiter of both the requirement for, and the execution of, this task. The Agency should consult broadly with relevant bodies, councils, landowners

and experts in order to formulate an appropriate campaign to deliver the safest possible roadside reserves. This task should be based predominantly on fire related issues and the safe passage of fire service vehicles along roadways, the safe egress of the public and landowners in fire related situations, as well as an ordinary common sense perspective.

Currently, planning permits for these types of works are routinely refused by municipal councils for reasons other than fire related safety. Too often environmental officers working in conjunction with compliant planning officers refuse permits as the "preservation" of the environment is placed above human life and human safety.

A lack of basic understanding of the dire consequences of a major fire, including that of the loss of human life, appears to escape these apparently well-intentioned but clearly naive officers. Flora and fauna will be better protected long term by careful, considered and appropriate maintenance and fire prevention works conducted on a regular basis and on an appropriate maintenance cycle.

- The Agency should be a mandatory referral authority for all new building and land use applications that currently require a planning permit.

Through the peri-urban and rural areas, particularly where the land is contained within a Bushfire Management Overlay, applicants are required to provide a bushfire management plan which, virtually always, involve a qualified fire consultant to prepare the relevant plan, liaise with and obtain the consent from the CFA, and provide that advice to the applicant, subsequently forming part of the planning application to council.

If such a plan is approved by the CFA (or other relevant fire agency) and agency consent is given for the building and/or use in the permit application, councils should have no power to refuse a permit, supposedly, on the basis of the "precautionary principle".

In many cases the refusal is hidden within other philosophical agendas but fire safety is used as an emotional tag to add to a catalogue of points of refusal.

The CFA as the agency is the expert in this field, councils are not.

Councils should have no power to override the consent of the agency.

- Investigate and consider the principle of "accredited fire consultants". Similar in principle to the very successful privatisation of Building Surveyors, the accreditation or "licensing" of fire consultants could assist greatly in managing government funding to this critical area of public safety.

Fire Consultants that are accredited could be engaged by a landowner, council, or local brigade, to report, design and possibly manage a suitable response to a fire maintenance program.

This initiative could greatly assist in minimising red tape and bureaucratic processes by empowering "accredited fire consultants" to justify and detail the need, logic, extent and resources required to respond to the fire maintenance and planning issues surrounding the delivery of a "safe as possible" outcome.

This initiative could also facilitate involvement of affected landowners into a system that currently appears to excludes them.

5. Are there any gaps in our thinking?

Our view is that there appear to be gaps in the thinking:

- The need for a new Agency with the powers spelt out in section 4.
- A lack of recognition of the power of interest groups to influence the policies of politicians, which may not be in the best interests of the community in relation to fire management on private and public lands.
- Superior means to enable the community to understand Fire Safety and their role in Fire Management.
- The effects of the current instability in the Victorian Fire Services on the ability of the Services to provide a cohesive Fire Management system.
- The need to retain and recruit volunteer firefighters, particularly in peri-urban areas.
- That fire management should utilise the knowledge and techniques/practices of traditional aboriginal land management.

6. Are we ready for the challenges of the future?

Why or why not?

The issues listed in point 5 (above) need to be addressed before we can say we are ready for the challenges of the future.

7. Are the current systems enough?

No.

Why not?

- There are too many interest groups working against each other in the competing areas of Fire Prevention and Protection of the Environment.
- The community needs to better understand their role in Fire Management.

Focus 1: Connections and networks

8. How important is the focus area "Connections and Networks" for you? (please rank 1-5)

5.

9. How can we ensure a whole-of-community approach to fire management?

The Fire Services need to communicate with and capitalise on the various existing community groups in each Brigade area in order to more effectively get the Summer and Winter Fire Safety messages to the community, and have the community better understand their expected role in Fire Management. These include: local sporting clubs; school parent groups; church communities; service clubs; horse and pony clubs; and special Interest Groups such as Nillumbik PALs or Landcare.

There is also a need for the Fire Services to address the competing views of various interest groups and the balance between Fire Management and "protecting the environment".

10. **What suggestions do you have for building stronger connections and networks?**

See Point 9.

Focus 2: Incentives

11. **How important is the focus area “incentives” for you?** (please rank 1-5)

4.

12. **What incentives do you think would help to motivate communities to get involved and why?**

Awards for the community with the best Fire Prevention work or best means of spreading the Fire Safety message. Recognition is an important means of motivation.

13. **What incentives do you think would help to motivate individuals to get involved and why?**

- Discounted insurance premiums for individuals in a Bushfire Management Overlay area who have undertaken Fire Prevention on their property to a required standard.
- To be allowed, under reasonable municipal regulations, to keep domestic animals, such as horses, alpacas, cattle, sheep or goats, on appropriately sized properties as a valuable resource for controlling excessive vegetation such as long, dry grass and the consequent fire threat. This should be allowed without imposition by municipal planners of the need for initial and/or annual permits with consequent costs.
- Awards to individuals who have demonstrated Fire Prevention works.

14. **What incentives do you think would help to motivate business to get involved and why?**

- Discounted insurance premiums for businesses in a Bushfire Management Overlay area who have undertaken Fire Safety on their property to a required standard.
- Awards to businesses who have undertaken Fire Prevention works.

15. **Aside from incentives, how else can communities be motivated to get involved?**

Better understanding of their expected role in protecting human life and property from fire.

16. **Aside from incentives, how else can individuals be motivated to get involved?**

Better understanding of their expected role in protecting human life and property from fire.

17. **Aside from incentives, how else can business be motivated to get involved?**

Better understanding of their expected role in protecting human life and property from fire.

Focus 3: Innovation

18. **How important is the focus area "innovation" for you?** (please rank 1-5)
4.
19. **Where do you think innovation would help in reducing the risks and/or impacts of fire?**
Research into: better ways of detecting fires; better ways of suppressing fires; less flammable building materials; and less fire prone building designs.
20. **How else can we support innovation?**
Encouraging R&D into fire retardant building materials and methods via rebates from the State Government
21.
Public recognition

Focus 4: Investment

22. **How important is the focus area "investment" for you?** (please rank 1-5)
4.
23. **How can we complete the picture of how resources are currently being used and the benefits?**
By putting a value on the hours contributed by the CFA Volunteers.
24. **Where do we invest resources to get the greatest benefit for everyone?**
Community Fire Safety education, Fire Prevention, and Fire Suppression.
25. **What else can we do to get the greatest benefit from our resources?**
Develop economies of scale by creating a new agency in Victoria to manage and/or coordinate the present duties of MFB, CFA, Forest Fire Management Victoria, and SES. This would eliminate much duplication and wastage of resources, and could deal with the current highly politicised environment.
26. **Are there any other focus areas that you think are important and should be considered but are not part of the four suggested?**
The current level of morale in the Fire Services.