

# Independent investigation into the Lancefield-Cobaw fire: What will change

November 2015

Bushfires are a part of summer in Victoria. Managing bushfire risk across Victoria is a challenging, yet vital task for the protection of the Victorian community and our environment.

In response to the *Review of performance targets for bushfire fuel on public land* by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is committed to making significant changes to how it operates across the state. These changes are to improve how it delivers the planned burning program. The implementation of these changes has already started and will be promptly delivered. Updates on progress in implementing the changes will be made publicly available.

## Rebuilding community trust

DELWP's core role is the provision of services to create a liveable, inclusive and sustainable Victoria. DELWP and its staff are committed to excellence in serving local communities. At the same time, DELWP's staff are proud and active members of those communities, right across Victoria. The Lancefield-Cobaw fire and the factors that led to it, have damaged the trust that communities have in DELWP. We will restore our relationship with communities and rebuild trust through our actions.

To do this DELWP will:

- Share our promise to the Victorian community through a community service charter describing how we will partner with and involve local communities in decision making.
- Engage with communities before, during and after a planned burn.
- Continue to build a culture of service excellence and improve the way in which DELWP engages with the community. Staff and managers will undertake formal learning and development to build capability in community engagement and customer service.
- Consult with and listen to communities to understand their needs and provide the information that they require – at all stages of the planned burning process and during bushfire response.
- Develop and build a 'brand' for forest firefighters that is recognisable and long lasting.

## Making it clear who is in charge of the planned burning program

Planned burning, like bushfire and emergency response operations, requires a clear management hierarchy, so the lines of accountability are clear, there is appropriate oversight and decision-making authority is appropriately delegated.

To do this DELWP will:

- Make the Chief Fire Officer report directly to the Secretary and have accountability for bushfire management operations, including delivery of the planned burning program.
- Create a single line of responsibility for bushfire prevention, preparedness and response – including planned burning – from state to local levels.
- Improve the accountability, structures and management processes for all non-bushfire land management services DELWP provides to local communities, including maintenance of roads and bridges, and pest and weed control.

Further and detailed consultation with staff will be conducted on these proposals.

## Implementing improved systems and processes

The decision-making and approvals systems and process that guides delivery of the planning burning program need comprehensive risk assessments. This will ensure the approach to the conduct of a planned burn will always be appropriate to the level of risk.

To do this DELWP will:

- Implement improved risk management and approvals systems and process consistent with international best practice in risk management.
- Ensure the assessment of risk looks beyond the boundaries of public land.
- Train staff involved in the planned burning program in the revised risk management process.
- Build improved quality control steps into all parts of the planned burning program. Planned burn approvals will be made at the appropriate level, by experienced staff who understand local conditions, and each stage of the approval process will be undertaken by a different person who will be clearly identified in the management structure.
- Work in close partnership with EMV, CFA and other land managers to reduce bushfire fuels across public and private land.
- Work with VicRoads and local government to support better management of roadside vegetation.
- Look for opportunities to make firewood produced during fire response and fuel management operations available to local communities.

## Addressing other issues in the planned burning program

To do this DELWP will:

- Investigate the conduct of the approvals and oversight process for the Lancefield-Cobaw Crozier's Track planned burn, building on and consistent with the independent investigation.
- Conduct a statewide audit of compliance with current standards, directions, instructions and guidelines issued by the Chief Fire Officer for the approval and oversight of a planned burn.
- Conduct a statewide audit into the implementation of recommendations arising from past examinations, investigations or audits of planned burns that have broken containment lines since 2003.

## Building on the positives

While the investigation team identified areas for improvement, it also identified a number of positive aspects relating to the Lancefield-Cobaw fire. These aspects and the many strengths and good practices done throughout the state will be built upon as we make changes to improve the way the planned burning program is delivered. This includes the strong integration of forest and fire management, the experience and competency of staff, gender and age diversity of staff and a strong safety culture.

To do this DELWP will:

- Engage with its staff, CFA and EMV to ensure that the best operational practices that exist in regions and districts are identified and applied statewide.
- Ensure the positive findings of the investigation team are applied in implementing improved systems and processes.
- Collaborate with CFA on better approaches to deliver skills and build Victoria's overall capability and capacity in fire management.

## Independent oversight

There will be independent monitoring and reporting on the implementation of recommendations and the changes that DELWP has committed to making.

To do this DELWP will:

- Request the IGEM to monitor and publicly report on progress in making these changes and in implementing the response to the independent investigation recommendations.
- Ask the IGEM to manage the prompt investigation and reporting of any future breaches of containment lines by a planned burn.
- Commission regular, independent auditing of the planned burning program.

