

'Cool' fires can be part of the forest fire solution

There is a better way of reducing the intensity of bush fires, and using forestry to fight fires may be one of them.



Ross Hampton

Hey @AdamBandt – here's a tip, fight fire with forestry. The conversation Mr Bandt wants to have about the long-term effects of climate change on the frequency and intensity of bush fires is worthwhile.

But we must also discuss the best way to reduce bush-fire intensity.

The process at present is pretty simple.

Step 1. Lock up the bush.

Step 2. Minimise activities that reduce the number and density of trees and fallen branches – be it hazard reduction burning or thinning of some areas, and building access roads.

Step 3. Cross fingers and pray no idiots start fires and lightning does not strike.

Step 4. When a bush fire inevitably starts and, because of all the fuel, becomes a raging wildfire, ignore all the rules of step 1 and 2, frantically back-burn, and rush in the bulldozers.

Surely, this is crazy.

There is a better way but it challenges those people with a simplistic view of the world that puts "natural conservation areas" in one camp, and "multiple-use forestry" in another.

Who can possibly count the loss from the NSW fires? How many trees and animals were incinerated in the name of conservation? And what of air quality and emissions? These fires have already added nearly 3.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide

to Australia's emissions for this year and where is the "environmentalism" in that?

During the election campaign, the Prime Minister announced that \$15 million would be directed into a "national bush-fire mitigation program".

We will argue strongly that this should mean a lot more than hazard reduction burns. Certainly "cool" fires are part of the solution, but what about fighting fire with at least some more forestry?

In the United States five months ago, a massive Arizona fire killed 19 firefighters.

In the last month another huge blaze – the Rim Fire – roared through the historic Yosemite National Park, burning the largest area in centuries.

John Buckley, the executive director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Centre, told Reuters if the US national park service had a tree-thinning process, it "would have unarguably made the Rim Fire far easier to contain, far less expensive and possibly not even a major disaster".

In Australia, Monash University researcher David Packham said reducing fuel loads in the Australian bush was an urgent issue.

Phil Cheney, a former head of CSIRO bush fire research, has found "fire intensity is far more significantly affected by fuel quantity, fuel dryness and wind strength than it is by temperature".

In the US they have had enough and are getting serious about fuel reduction. The US Forest Service is using reduction burning and forestry thinning to remove excess fuel.

Are we listening?

Our Rural Fire Service does an amazing job but this a largely volunteer force made up of committed people with day jobs. Despite bundles of commitment and as much training as can be squeezed in, this

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valiant work is essentially trying to close the door on a bolting horse.

AFFPA hopes to persuade Prime Minister Tony Abbott when it comes to the bush fire prevention fund, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

And preservation is not a binary proposition.

Perhaps @AdamBandt can agree?

Ross Hampton is CEO of the Australian Forest Products Association