

MessageMatrix



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Weather

It has been a season of weather extremes, from bushfires in the west to cyclones in the north and floods in the east. The weather upheaval is mainly due to the effects of La Niña. During La Niña the sea surface temperatures across the tropical eastern Pacific Ocean are lower than normal. La Niña's counterpart, El Niño (the usual cause of our droughts), sees ocean temperatures rise. Typical effects of La Niña are an increased number of tropical cyclones in the north and increased rainfall. This has very much been the case over the last few months (check out the BOM map showing rainfall percentiles for Dec-Feb). The BOM has reported that La Niña is showing signs of weakening and predicts the effects will weaken over autumn, returning to neutral by winter 2011.

Bushfires

All this rain has certainly reduced the bushfire threat in the eastern states. Unfortunately Perth experienced a large bushfire in January, resulting in 71 houses being destroyed and 39 being damaged. The fire was started by sparks from an angle grinder.

Another tragic event was the death of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Officer, John Garland, who died after being trapped under a fallen tree in a burnt out area.

Despite the wet weather, there have still been bushfires. These include East Gippsland, Victoria; the Blue Mountains and Royal NP in NSW; the Barossa Valley and Kanagaroo Island in SA; and King Island in Bass Strait.

Overseas in the northern Gaililee area of Israel, a large bushfire burnt 4000ha during December. The fire caused the evacuation of 13,000 people and sadly resulted in the death of 41 people.

The two year anniversary of Black Saturday was on 7th February. Services and events were held around the state.

Victorian elections

The election of the Coalition government in Victoria came with a promise to implement all the recommendations made

by the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission. The previous Labour government had rejected the buyback of properties in highest bushfire risk areas and the replacement of the overhead electricity lines with underground cables.

The new government has appointed Peter Ryan as the Minister for Bushfire Response.

Moo

A controversial move by the Coalition government is the release of cattle back into the Victorian high country. 400 cattle have been put back into the Alpine National Park as part of a research study investigating the impact cattle have on the environment and in reducing fire risk. The move has been met with significant backlash from the scientific and environmental groups.

Fuel reduction burning

Scientists working in the Mallee have suggested the VBRC 5% fuel reduction burn target is inappropriate for mallee vegetation and have made a call for a science-based approach to burning, worked out region by region, rather than a blanket target.

Bushfire people

Bruce Esplin resigned as the Emergency Services Commissioner. His last day was new years eve, after 10 years in the position.

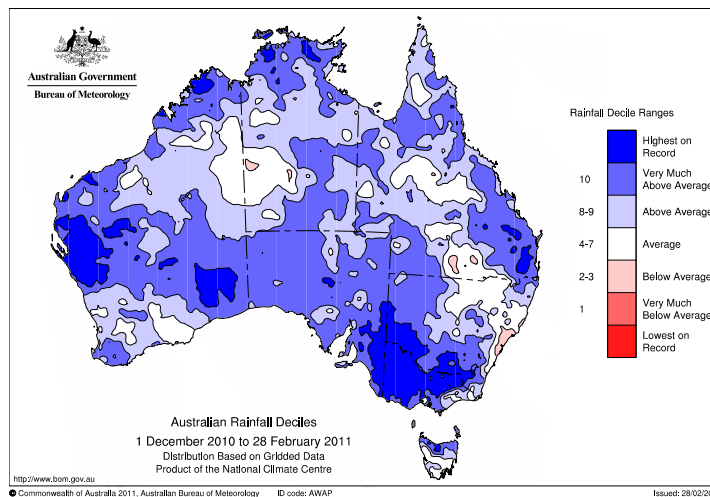
The South Australian Country Fire Authority has appointed Greg Nettleton as their new Chief.

Bushfire activities

Operation Firesetter involves Victorian police patrolling arson hotspots during the high fire danger periods with the aim of deterring arson.

The Victorian FireReady roadshow was launched by the CFA December. The roadshow travelled to Victoria's 52 most at risk townships over summer.

The CFA have released a 'Guide to Retrofit Homes Against Bushfire'. Developed by the CFA and the Building Commission, the booklet explains how to retrofit houses up to BAL-29....cont page 2
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Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission: Planning and Building

Chapter 6 of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) *Final Report* considers how planning and building policies and controls could be modified to ensure increases in bushfire safety of both existing and future development.

A component of our work with Cardinia Shire Council was to consider the implications of the VBRC recommendations for planning and building in bushfire prone areas. Here is an extract of that work.

The VBRC consider that the protection of human life should be the overriding objective in implementing bushfire mitigation measures, including the regulation of planning and building. The chapter makes reference to the 2004 report of the National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management (COAG, 2004), which cited land-use planning as the 'single most important mitigation measure in preventing future disaster losses in areas of new development'.

The VBRC identifies the role planning can play in reducing the bushfire risk to people to include:

- Restricting development in high risk areas;
- Increasing the survivability of developments;
- Assisting fire fighter access to properties;
- Ensuring properties have a (static) water supply for firefighting; and
- Creating safe evacuation routes.

At the State level, land use planning is regulated under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. The VBRC sees the role of the Act as ensuring land-use planning decisions are determined by what is best for the community, rather than individual properties. Currently this is mainly dictated under the Victorian Planning Provisions (VPP) as a prescribed set of Zones and Overlays. Zones determine the type and size of a development whilst Overlays set out objectives for how that land should be developed/managed. Most 'rural' zones contain basic bushfire safety requirements. The relevant overlay for bushfire is the Wildfire Management Overlay (WMO) that, where applied, sets out requirements for siting, vegetation management, water, access and construction.

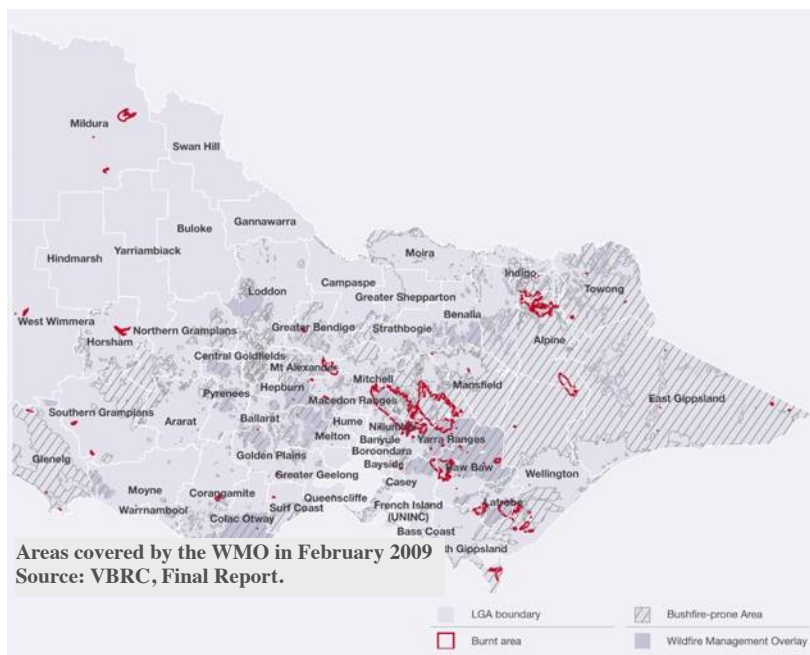
The VBRC considers the Victorian planning framework to be weak and insufficient to adequately address bushfire

risk. The VBRC identifies two key areas in which the Victorian Planning Scheme can strengthen its role in bushfire mitigation. These are:

1. Restrict development in areas which pose an unacceptably high bushfire risk; and
2. Ensure risk mitigation measures and construction standards are related to the degree of risk.

Further, the VBRC heard (and agreed) that the application

of the VPP across the State by local councils has been inconsistent and ad-hoc. There were many reasons cited for this including, lack of political will, the regulations being complex and confused, and often included conflicting and contradictory priorities. The VBRC assesses the VPP as lacking the specific detail or guidance to help councils discharge their obligations to minimise bushfire risk when making planning decisions.



The VBRC identifies a number of solutions to the key shortcomings of the VPP. These include:

- Identifying an acceptable level of risk;
- Providing clearer guidance on how to prioritise objectives (with protecting human life the top priority);
- Disallowing development in areas of high conservation value with a high bushfire risk;
- Enabling landholders to undertake 'reasonable' steps to reduce bushfire risk; and
- Taking into account the effects of climate change on bushfire risk.

These high level policies developed at a State level then need to be interpreted and applied to the local context within the municipal planning policy framework. The VBRC consider improved local policy as vital to supplementing the State policies and that all councils in bushfire risk areas should have a bushfire policy within their local policy planning framework.

The regulation preventing building in high bushfire prone areas is considered weak. The VBRC conclude that insufficient importance was given to the risk of bushfire and the potential threat it poses to life and property. The strongest tool available is the WMO, however this is limited to influencing aspects of development, such as

siting and vegetation management. Prior to the 2009 fires, the WMO had led to few refusals for planning permission for the construction of a dwelling. Further, the WMO as it existed in February 2009, was flawed due to the lack of accurate identification and mapping of high risk areas and the lack of adoption by many local councils. Less than 50% of the area burnt on 7th February 2009 was covered by the WMO.

Recommendations regarding changes to the WMO include:

- Changing the term wildfire to bushfire, to reflect the more common word used in the Victorian vernacular;
- Improved mapping of bushfire prone areas;
- Providing a more streamlined process for councils to implement the WMO; and
- Including all types of vegetation that pose a bushfire risk, such as grasslands.

The VBRC also made recommendations regarding the compliance and enforcement of planning and building permit conditions. Although the local council is responsible for the enforcement of permit conditions, there is currently no requirement under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* for councils to check conditions have been fulfilled during development. On the other hand, the *Building Act 1995* requires an occupancy permit to be issued, to ensure at least initial compliance with the building permit.

A major impediment to regulating compliance is a lack of resources. The VBRC, however, hold the view that local councils should do more to ensure compliance. Although the obligation to comply with permit conditions rests with

the permit holder, this does not relieve councils' responsibility to enforce the conditions.

The VBRC suggest the following ways by which councils could enforce planning conditions:

- Planning infringement notices;
- Application to VCAT for an enforcement order against the permit holder; and
- Prosecution for the offence.

However, the VBRC adds there are less formal methods to enforce compliance, such as letters, telephone calls or council officer visits.

There is also no explicit requirement to check whether either the planning or building permit is complied with over time. Building maintenance and other works for bushfire safety need to be maintained, particularly during the bushfire season. Currently there is no mechanism to do this and the VBRC found no practical way of ensuring ongoing compliance. The VBRC suggested a better integration of the role of Municipal Fire Prevention Officers (MFPOs) in issuing Fire Prevention Notices that align to WMO permit conditions.

The VBRC also expressed concerns that council planners do not have the requisite skills to ensure adequate bushfire safety measures are incorporated into planning decisions and suggested an appropriate course aimed at planners should be developed by the CFA.

The VBRC made a total of 19 recommendations relating to planning and building. The Victorian government has committed to implementing all the recommendations made.

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Bushfire research

Australian scientists from ANU, CSU, UQ and UTS have used pollen fossils to determine that bushfires in Australia date back more than 60 million years (50 million more than previously thought).



UTS honours student, Lyndle Hardstaff was awarded the Jim Rose Geography Prize for her paper on how leaves spread bushfire. The study showed there is little difference between the flammability of exotic and native species when fresh, but dry leaves of exotics are significantly more flammable than natives.

Terramatrix wrap

Many kilometres have been travelled in the last few months with rail audits, WMOs and reserve management plans. A special mention to Cat, who audited 98 of the total 99 rail audit points - impressive!

Duncan has been settling into student life, undertaking a nursing degree. Nancy is about to head off on maternity leave. See the banner photos for proof of both.

To fill these gaps, Terramatrix has welcomed two new staff members to the team. Elise Newman as administrative assistant and Rachael Thompson as a senior analyst.



Elise joined Terramatrix in February 2011 as an Administration Assistant. She holds an AdDip in Engineering Technology (Jewellery) and a Dip in Video Production. Two years after graduating from her Jewellery Diploma she has set up her own label making contemporary jewellery. She is also a part owner of the jewellery label Paws & Effect which specialises in animal shaped jewellery. Elise also has a keen interest in music which led her to volunteering for community radio station Triple R for over 9 years. She has recently come back to Australia after living in London for 6 months.

Rachael has spent the last 17 years working or volunteering in the Emergency Management/Fire sector. Most recently with CFA managing their Fire Planning and Vegetation Management programs. Rachael is excited to join Terramatrix having enjoyed working with the company on joint projects in the past. Rachael's passion is travel and anything French! (especially the Tour de France), she loves cooking, spending time with her partner and two daughters and drinking wine with friends.

