PIA VICTORIA

POLICY POSITION PAPER

BUSHFIRE HAZARD
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SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

In February 2020, PIA National declared a climate emergency, committing to work on practical initiatives to change the way we plan in recognition of the increasing urgency of action. At a State level, Victoria has the Climate Change Act (2017) which commits us to zero emissions by 2050 and to the development of a series of ‘adaptation’ papers. While important reforms to address mitigation will be a focus for PIA’s advocacy under the emergency declaration, recent events have highlighted the immediate need to consider adaptation in planning for hazards such as bushfire.

Victoria is one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world, with a natural landscape that is dependent on bushfires returning at regular intervals to sustain the life cycles of many plant and animal species. Learning to co-exist with bushfires safely, protecting important values such as human life and property, while also protecting the ecosystems that sustain us, is becoming increasingly important for Victoria’s communities.

Over the past 10 years, Victoria has experienced more intensive bushfires with significant loss of life and property. The most severe events include the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009; the Otway Ranges and Great Ocean Road bushfires in 2015/16; and the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires in the Alpine region and Gippsland.

Following the Royal Commission into the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, there were significant reforms to Victoria’s planning framework that strengthened the consideration of bushfire at different stages of the planning process and improved integration between the planning and building systems.

Ongoing bushfire management planning is an increasingly important action to reduce bushfire risk, with climate change increasing the extent, frequency and intensity of severe weather conditions intersecting with population growth leading to the expansion of cities and towns, and the desire of more people to live in environmentally appealing (but potentially hazardous) areas.

BACKGROUND

At Clause 13.02-1S, Victoria’s Planning Policy Framework states that the objective of bushfire planning is “to strengthen the resilience of settlements and communities to bushfire through risk-based planning that prioritises the protection of human life”. This means that all decision making under the framework must give higher priority to the protection of human life than to other policy considerations.

Bushfire hazard is determined by vegetation, topography and climate conditions. The Minister for Planning has determined Bushfire Prone Areas (BPAs) in Victoria which are likely to be subject to bushfire risk. Local planning authorities, in conjunction with State agencies, have identified Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) areas which are areas of highest bushfire risk within BPAs.

The BMO is the primary tool to assess applications for use and development in areas subject to high bushfire risk. There is the ability for planning authorities to prepare schedules to the BMO to tailor planning requirements commensurate with bushfire risk.

PIA VICTORIA’S CURRENT POSITION

PIA Victoria has been supportive of the planning reforms on bushfire management that have been introduced into Victoria’s planning system over the past 10 years. Victoria’s planning system on bushfire management is widely considered to be best practice of all Australian states, if not the world. However, PIA considers that with the likelihood of more severe bushfires in a hotter and drier climate, that there is an ongoing challenge to ensure that Victoria’s policy objective to prioritise the protection of human life from bushfire is effectively implemented.

PIA Victoria’s position, which is informed by a National policy position built around strategic settlement planning, community resilience and capacity building, is summarised as follows:

• It is recognised that planning, more so than other systems, provides a critical role to integrate spatial, physical and environmental systems with societal systems that address community strengthening and resilience.

• It is accepted that planning must continue to improve our settlements and systems so that bushfires are events that can be managed, and that communities are not significantly impacted on an ongoing basis.

• Hazards must be identified in a longer-term context of a hotter and drier climate, and the assessment of hazards should be reviewed on an ongoing basis, having regard to ongoing research on event occurrence and intensity.

• The level of risk in any given location should continue to be understood through the application of the ‘risk triangle’, that assesses the three interactive elements of hazard, exposure and vulnerability in mapping to ensure that risk to a location is informed by the characteristics of the bushfire hazard itself, exposure of humans, and the level and type of vulnerability.

1 Planning for Better Bushfire Management Strategy
3 The Risk Triangle, Crichton, D, 1999
PROPOSED REFORMS FOR DISCUSSION

PIA Victoria is seeking the following reforms to the planning system:

1. Investigation of measures to discourage further development in areas that are identified as having an unacceptable level of risk from bushfire, having particular regard to areas which may be zoned for residential use but not yet developed.

2. Adequate resourcing of relevant authorities, such as the CFA, to ensure they can effectively participate in the strategic planning of communities through structure planning and subdivision processes.

3. Greater involvement of strategic planning in any bushfire recovery phase to identify opportunities to reduce the ongoing risk to communities.

4. That a holistic State government-led review of the current application of the BMO across Victorian planning schemes is undertaken with a view to understanding the level to which current application of the tool reflects best practice in relation to current and future risks.

5. The establishment of a comprehensive program for ongoing monitoring of the BMO, its relationship to evolving scientific knowledge of bushfire behaviour and the prioritisation of planning scheme amendment approvals related to the application of the BMO by DELWP.

6. The development of a consolidated set of design guidelines that bring together all material required for decision making through the planning system, including those published by DELWP, the CFA and other relevant authorities and which address all aspects of development including siting, materiality and landscaping.

RESEARCH NEEDS

PIA Victoria has identified the need for further research to better guide decision-making and advocacy, including:

1. A review of Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal decisions to identify potential policy gaps and any matters that require clearer guidance or resolution.

2. A review of current practice to improve understanding of the relationship between planning decisions, permit conditions, and ongoing maintenance requirements, particularly where enforcement falls under the responsibility of the planning system.

3. A review of the current relationship between the BMO and overlays intended to protect biodiversity such as the Vegetation Protection Overlay (VPO) and the Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO), so that the balance of policy decisions is better managed, having regard to the increased risk of bushfire and the increased threats to biodiversity and need for urban cooling under a changing climate.

MONITORING AND REVIEW

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