



6<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Mr Paul Bates,  
Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning,  
Loddon Mallee Region,  
1-7 Taylor St,  
Epsom 3551.

Dear Mr Bates,

I am writing on behalf of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club and other community groups in the Castlemaine area who have been involved with the on-going consultation about the Strategic Fuel Break (SFB) program in the Mount Alexander region.

We are very pleased to have been consulted on this important issue and are providing as much information as we can about the relevant threatened species and vegetation communities in the proposed Fuel Break areas to assist with decisions on the types and extent of vegetation clearing.

During this process, as a result of our discussions, there have been changes to the program that have involved moving a proposed SFB from a Landcare project area to a nearby area infested with woody weeds. We have also seen a change in emphasis towards woody weeds for several other areas that have been worked on so far which we see as a win-win scenario. These are examples of where consultation and local knowledge are essential for a successful outcome.

During a recent visit to the Bells Lane (Muckleford) SFB with Justine Leahy from the SFB team, we reviewed the work that had been carried out. One short section we visited had been cut with brush-cutters. This experimental section gave, in our opinion, a much better result than slashing, as the vegetation was reduced to an acceptable height for the break but still maintained a good ground cover of living vegetation and had less impact on the forest. This was in contrast to other areas that had been subjected to tractor-mounted slashing where there was much greater impact on the shrub layer and significant amounts of soil disturbance from vehicle tracks. Soil disturbance has the potential to increase erosion during heavy rainfall events as well as encouraging the establishment of annual introduced grasses and other weeds.

Baseline and ongoing monitoring of all SFBs for impacts on vegetation both native and introduced is pivotal for assessing the outcomes of the works in creating effective fire breaks as well as on native flora and fauna and weed dispersal.

About 25% of the Bells Lane SFB was within the Muckleford Conservation Reserve with around 75% in adjoining State Forest or roadside bordering private land. Our preference is to avoid disturbance to areas of highest conservation value such as Nature Conservation Reserves and for alternative more degraded areas to be used for the SFBs where possible. This principle should also be applied in other areas where SFBs are created. While many parts of the Muckleford Forest and other forests in our region have been degraded through mining, timber harvesting and other management regimes, our groups are supporting positive regeneration of these vital ecological areas as a whole.

Finally, we would like you to pass on our thanks to Justine Leahy and her team for the time that they have spent working with us and their ability to take our issues into account. We have serious concerns about some of the proposed SFBs in floristically rich areas south of Castlemaine so hope that similar levels of consultation and flexibility using staff with high levels of local expertise will be maintained in the future with respect to both SFBs and other forest management programs.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Euan Moore', with a stylized, cursive script.

Euan Moore

Vice-president,

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club

On behalf of:

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club

Muckleford Catchment Landcare

Castlemaine Landcare Group

Muckleford Forest Friends Group

Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests