

Scientists warn forest industry plan could increase fire risk

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January 9,
2020

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January 9, 2020 — 5.44pm

Scientists warn a timber industry proposal to allow some logging in national parks and on other public land to reduce bushfire risk is an "incredibly misleading" idea that could actually make forests more flammable.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) have said the forestry industry should be used, along with more hazard reduction burning, in a new approach to bushfire prevention.



Old-growth forest in East Gippsland.

AFPA chief executive Ross Hampton said new initiatives to make forests "more fire resilient" could include selective logging to protect homes, water catchments and key infrastructure, and mechanical reduction of undergrowth to reduce the fuel load in forests.

"Will we do what we have always done or will we open the curtain and look at all the possibilities?" Mr Hampton said.

But Australian National University landscape ecology expert Professor David Lindenmayer said multiple academic and forest industry studies showed forest thinning in Australia "makes forests more fire prone".

"It [thinning and mechanical fuel reduction] is a misleading argument that is simply wrong," Prof Lindenmayer said.

Forest and fire expert Professor Philip Zylstra from Curtin University said while thinning trees might sound like a simple way to reduce fuel loads and with it fire risk, it would actually make the forest more flammable.

"Before thinning is used as a hazard reduction tool, there should be evidence to underpin it," he said. "The mechanisms that drive fire lead us to expect thinning will make fires worse.

"Thinning trees would allow stronger winds access to fires burning beneath the trees. Also the more open a tree canopy is, the more able fire is to spread because the leaf litter will be drier from more light coming through and there will be a more dense shrub layer due to increased light for plants - that will make fires far more intense."

An AFPA policy proposal from 2016 said thinning was a "small but important step" that could be used to reduce fuel loads in water catchments and near strategic assets and houses. The trees harvested from selective thinning could be used for timber and the removed undergrowth harvested for woodchip products or bio-fuel.

Mr Hampton said details of the policy might need to be updated but thinning and fuel reduction must be considered. Any new initiatives should be guided by science and come after a national bushfire royal commission, he said, adding that mechanical fuel reduction had delivered fire-risk benefits in the United States and Scandinavian countries.



Prof Zylstra said thinning and fuel reduction wouldn't be feasible across broad areas but could be used close to homes, although cleared zones would be more effective.

"You couldn't do that on a landscape scale. It would have to be focused on asset-protection zones where you can get vehicles in to fight fires," he said.

Professor Lindenmayer also said doing mechanical fuel reduction on a scale required to be effective would be too expensive and damage the environment.

"You would need a huge road network to cart the wood-chipped undergrowth and we know roads are one of the major ignition sources for bushfires, and building that many roads would cost a fortune," he said. "More intervention in forests will also have a big negative impact on biodiversity.

"I know why the industry is talking about this, they have run out of timber ... this is crass opportunism to take advantage of a catastrophe."

But Mr Hampton said his suggestions were "not about trying to open up forestry in national parks" but trying to start a discussion about "how to make the landscape fire resilient".

"We all have to avoid people running to their corners, in an ideological sense," he said.