

A range of uncertainties regarding the ecological outcomes of fuel reduction burning are evident but it is not clear that the research needed to resolve such uncertainties is being given priority (or adequate funding). For example, there were no references in the Fire Summit presentations to fungi as a critical component of the forest ecosystem and an essential pathway for tree nutrition. There are no references to fungi in the recently released [Bushfire Management Strategy](#).

There are several general commitments to collaboration in DEECA's 2024 [Bushfire Management Strategy](#) and [implementation plan](#) but the relationship between the experiential knowledge of practitioners and the more formal domain of scientific research is not considered.

One positive reference in the Bushfire Management Strategy is the discussion of the Adaptive Management Cycle ([page 56](#)) in relation to the Joint Fuel Management Program. The Adaptive Management Cycle attempts to document the experience of the practitioners as part of bringing the lessons (patterns) of such experience into discursive form. DEECA's [Bushfire Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework](#) also emphasises the continuous improvement loop from the evaluation reports.

However, missing from both of these commitments is the structured identification of theoretical uncertainty so that such uncertainties can be explored in more formal research projects. A positive sign is Goal 5 of DEECA's Fire Ecology Strategy Roadmap: *Improve the comprehensiveness and rigour of ecosystem resilience in the context of fire management by supporting research projects and better integrating contemporary science.* (Unfortunately, it appears that DEECA's Fire Ecology Strategy Roadmap has not yet been published, at least Google could not find it.)

Trust deficit

DEECA has inherited a serious trust deficit from the role played by DELWP in providing cover for VicForests in the logging wars of the last two decades.

While the policy narrative in the recently released [Bushfire Management Strategy](#) is inclusive and comprehensive ('all things to all persons'), DEECA still needs to properly fund forest fire science and address the gulf between science and practice in relation to forest fire risk management.

Forest Fire Management [says that](#) "We welcome your comments all year round and we encourage you to have input into all parts of the strategic and operational planning process." However, the delivery plans associated with individual planned burns are not accessible through the internet and there appear to be no protocols which might govern community consultation, monitoring, and feedback in relation to particular planned burns.

The experience of the Our Strathbogrie Forest group of DEECA's disregard of their concerns regarding the [Barjarg-Harpers Rd planned burn](#) suggests that DEECA has some way to go in gaining the trust and respect of the community based forest conservation movement.

RFPG is preparing a more detailed commentary on these matters. Feedback on the above preliminary notes would be appreciated.

Forest fire risk management: Where is the science?

RFPG

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Many in the community-based forest conservation movement have been concerned about the role of fuel reduction burning in forest fire risk management, particularly in the light of the recent [Strathbogrie case](#) and the [evidence](#) regarding the impact of planned burns on flammability.

Earlier this year, the Rubicon Forest Protection Group asked our key forestry resource person, Nick Legge, to attend the recent Forestry Australia 2024 *Fire Summit* held at the University of Melbourne on 26 & 27 June 2024 and to report back to the group on the state of forest fire science as presented at the Summit.

The RFPG remains concerned about the state of fire science having reviewed the [presentations from the Summit](#) and considered Nick Legge's report. We have three specific concerns: the underfunding of forest fire risk science; the gulf between science versus policy and practice; and the trust deficit facing DEECA.

Underfunding

A case study of the underfunding of forest science was provided in the presentation by Ass Prof Lauren Bennett, of the University of Melbourne whose presentation, [FESA in the Wombat Forest: Opportunities and challenges presented by long-term prescribed fire experiments](#), described the history and findings of the long running Fire Effects Study Areas project (FESA) which is one of the few long term fire experiments in Australia, still on insecure funding apparently.

RFPG has previously sought to highlight the significance of fungi in native forest ecology (see [Bowd and Lindenmayer 2019](#); [Suz et al 2021](#); [RFPG 2022 Eco Alert](#)). It remains neglected (see [UniMelb and DELWP 2016](#)).

Tensions between science and policy/practice

The tensions between science and practice was expressed in the polemical approach taken by several of the practitioner presentations at the Fire Summit and a certain disrespect for scientists whose conclusions may not align with established practice.

An exception was the [presentation by Dr Jane Cawson](#) from FLARE Wildlife Research at the University of Melbourne who reported a community attitudes study which explicitly addressed the contradictions and commonalities between prescribed burning and biodiversity outcomes.

However, the institutional relationships between science and practice also need to be restructured. The practice of forest stewardship needs to be more transparent and systematically scrutinised so that uncertainties in the knowledge frameworks guiding such practice can be identified and given priority for formal scientific investigation.

The findings of the FESA research, presented by Assoc Prof Bennett illustrate the role of science in informing practice, in this case demonstrating that spring burns are less damaging than autumn burns and that a 10 year cycle is better than a 3 year cycle.