



## INVESTIGATING PLANNED BURNS AT NARBETHONG

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Narbethong and Marysville have been wreathed in smoke over the last few weeks as fuel reduction burning gets underway in the mild Indian summer.

Rubicon Forest Protection Group members Bev Dick, Nick Legge and Jill Sanguinetti looked at six sections of forest near Narbethong to get a close-up view of the impact that planned burns may be having on forest health, plant life and biodiversity.

We looked at five different spots in Narbethong between Marysville Road, the Old Coach Road, Mayo's Track and the Acheron Way

What we found was deeply disturbing.

First, we looked at the forest on either side of Old Coach Road, near Marysville Road, which had been badly burned on Black Saturday. On the northern side, the recovering forest had been burned again in 2022 in a planned burn.

The forest here was dry and degraded with open patches covered mainly with small wattles, bracken, dry logs and leaf litter and 6 – 10 metre high trees that had been scorched. However a fair number of young eucalypts had survived the scorching. Apart from the wattle and bracken, there seemed to be very little floral diversity in the understory or ground layer. There was a stand of forty or fifty blackened tree ferns growing in dry earth with no canopy shading. About half were dead. Others had pale, shrunken fronds and were obviously struggling.

The most shocking impression was that two years after the 2022 fuel reduction burn, the forest floor was still had plenty of dry, light fuel. Much of the dry fuel on the ground consisted of undergrowth which had been killed in the burn and other plants that had grown since and then died. There were also a lot of partly burned thin logs and branches from the 2022 burn and there was a lot of dry bracken.



*Old Coach Road 2022 burn site showing dry fuel and bracken.*



*Dead and dying tree ferns on Old Coach 'road 2022 burn site.*

On the other side of the road, the recovering, as yet unburned forest looked green and healthy, with plenty of new eucalypts and several plant species that were not in evidence in the adjacent 2022 burned area including cassinia, gahnia and prostanthera (mint bush). We are intending to go back and try to identify other plants and shrubs that are recovering since Black Saturday but absent from the adjacent (2022) burnt area.



*Forest recovering from Black Saturday along Old Coach Road (not burned in 2022)*

Next we looked at the block that had been burned a week earlier and was still smouldering. This was the 90 hectare block between Old Coach Road, Mayo's Track and the Acheron Way. It was clear that this was not a 'cool burn' as many young eucalypts (6 – 10 metre high, probably post 2009) trees had been killed in the burn. Their dry leaves would obviously form a layer of leaf litter to fuel a future fire.



*Recovering forest (along Mayo's Track) still smouldering from recent planned burn. Note dead mid story eucalypts and piles of fallen logs.*

We then went up Mayo's Track to the Acheron Way where we saw the western end of the Old Coach Road block that had been burned in 2022. Again, we saw a lot of dry fuel largely consisting of dead and dried-out understorey plants.



*Forest (along Acheron Way) burned in 2022 planned burn showing dried out understorey vegetation.*



*Green, as yet unburned forest directly opposite the above patch of forest*

The comparison between the dried out 2022 burned forest and the recovering forest on the opposite side of the Acheron Way was stunning. The 2009 recovering forest was a lush green with a diversity of plants and quite a few large, healthy-looking trees.

Returning from Acheron Way along Marysville Road, we looked at the Narbethong-St. Fillans burn area which in places was in flames, although there were no obvious patrol trucks or workers to manage or control it. It seemed to be a slow fire in some places but a hot fire in other places. At 8.30 pm that night, quite a few 20 to 30 metre high trees could be seen burning from the inside and flames were higher and stronger. CFA and DEECA trucks and a bulldozer were assembling.

What we saw in the course of our brief 2 hour investigation is consistent with [Zylstra's and Lindenmayer's 2023 research findings](#). Planned burns appear to be killing trees, reducing biodiversity, drying out the forests, and increasing flammability. DEECA's planned burn program, costing taxpayers millions, may be *increasing* the risk of future megafires and hence *increasing* the already strong risk to lives and assets.

Our brief inspection at Narbethong confirms the importance of the detailed ecological survey of forests that the Victorian Forest Alliance is about to undertake in order to come up with a more definitive, evidence-based analysis of the impacts of planned burning.