

THE AUSTRALIAN

Best response to bushfire crisis is more prevention

EDITORIAL



By THE AUSTRALIAN EDITORIAL,

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On Monday Scott Morrison dismissed any concern about the promised budget surplus as he committed \$2bn towards bushfire recovery. “What matters to me is the human cost and meeting whatever cost we need to meet,” he said. That rhetoric is no surprise at a time of grief and trauma, when there are more than 200 active fires. But any effective response to the crisis will require hard-headed allocation of limited resources, robust policymaking and debate free of ideology.

It’s clear that commonwealth-state relations need to be sharpened up. This is not just a matter of avoiding petty squabbles and buck-passing but giving serious thought to clever and efficient ways for governments to work together across a bushfire-prone country to protect lives and property. Can COAG rise to the occasion? Is there a need for a new intergovernmental bushfire body? Or might crisis-driven goodwill and streamlined inter-agency protocols do the trick? The answers may become clearer as former AFP commissioner Andrew Colvin rolls out the Bushfire Recovery Agency, which is supposed to work closely with states and territories over the next two years. Victoria also has a new bushfire recovery body.

Mr Morrison has acknowledged the likely role of climate change in extending the bushfire season. Periodic drought and wind-driven fires in eucalypt forests are long-established facts of the Australian landscape but higher temperatures and reduced rainfall increase the risks. We must concentrate our efforts where we can do most to protect our citizens. After December’s climate conference in Madrid, it has only become more obvious that there is no political

momentum for the deep emission cuts urged by the UN. This reality would not change were a marginal emitter such as Australia to make a dramatic, purely symbolic gesture. As it is, we are on track to meet our targets under the Paris agreement, without pointlessly sabotaging the economy that produces the wealth necessary if we are to respond to the bushfire crisis.

As has happened time and again over the years, we are paying a heavy financial and human cost attempting to fight near uncontrollable fires. We have to put more resources into bushfire prevention and adapting how we live. A helpful push in this direction may come from the insurance industry, which has logged more than 6000 claims for a total of more than \$400m less than halfway into the fire season. For a country supposedly familiar with bushfire, our policy framework has been subpar. Ash Wednesday, Black Friday — the names get recycled as one horror follows another and the latest inquiry repeats familiar warnings.

Climate change is invoked by some activists as if it renders irrelevant the need to reduce fuel loads with prescribed burning; the opposite is likely to be the case. We need an honest debate revisiting the research on low-intensity cool burning, establishing the facts beyond dispute, and creating a community consensus to act upon them. In the last few days, some commentators have claimed that Victoria's 2009 Black Saturday fires showed the impotence of prescribed burning against fires of catastrophic intensity, yet that very intensity has a lot to do with fuel load.

The royal commission following those fires said it was “concerned that the state has maintained a minimalist approach to prescribed burning despite recent official or independent reports and inquiries, all of which have recommended increasing the prescribed burning program”. As recently as February last year, Victoria's former chief fire officer Ewan Waller warned that fuel loads had been allowed to return to dangerous levels in some parts of the state. By contrast, Western Australia's “Red Book” manual for cool burning may be a good model for other states to examine.

The Greens acknowledge a role for prescribed burning but the concern is that misplaced environmental sentiment and a host of other factors have rendered it perfunctory and ineffective. Multiple agency approvals at state level make cool burning of national parks and forests difficult enough and there can be the added complication of federal sign-off. Our

sprawling cities have pushed ever more tree-changers into fire-prone areas. Prescribed burning brings them not only the irritation of smoke and poor air quality but also the fear of a fire getting out of control.

Politicians and bureaucrats have become risk-averse, and fuel loads accumulate, especially if the window of opportunity has been narrowed by climate change.

We need institutions, rules and attitudes that make bushfire prevention easier, not harder. Part of the answer has to be plugging in more local responsibility and expertise. We need better ways to assess and act on the advice of those living near national parks, farmers, the longer established residents of tree-change towns, and local bushfire volunteers. There is an opportunity to galvanise support for change. Many Australians are learning the false economy of skimping on bushfire prevention. It is a bitter lesson and must not be squandered.