



Media Release

21 January 2020

MINISTERIAL ROUNDTABLE ON THE BUSHFIRE ENVIRONMENT RESPONSE

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, with environmental and Traditional Owner groups from around the Country, yesterday attended the Bushfire Environment Response Roundtable held by the Federal Minister for the Environment, the Hon Sussan Ley.

The meeting was a positive opportunity to strengthen Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice in landscape-level responsiveness and on-going management of Country.

The Roundtable highlighted the growing recognition of traditional knowledge and the need for collaboration across both public and private landholders as well as natural resource managers and environmental groups.

Jason Mifsud, Chair of the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, said that the Roundtable demonstrates the importance of traditional knowledge in the broader system of managing Country.

“The Federation will be working closely with Traditional Owners across the State over the coming weeks to further embed their critical role in local, State and Federal strategies and responses. We need transformational change to meet these unprecedented challenges” he said.

The Federation acknowledges Minister Ley’s constructive approach with the sector and in particular her support for greater integration of indigenous fire knowledge and practice into contemporary land management and landscape-level responses to the bushfires.

Rodney Carter, Chair of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy Project Control Group said, “the significant work undertaken to develop the 2019 Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy provides a strong foundation and framework for agencies to support Traditional Owners to lead the reintroduction of cultural fire in caring for Country.

“The implementation of the Strategy will need long-term support and resourcing for further development of knowledge, practice and capacity to ensure operational feasibility in a changed environment.”

Encl:

Statement to the Ministerial Bushfire Environment Roundtable 20 January 2020.

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Federation of
Victorian Traditional
Owner Corporations

Statement to the Ministerial Roundtable with Minister Ley

Monday 20 January, 2pm-3:30pm

Introduction

Like many, we are deeply saddened and concerned about the ongoing impact the bushfires are having on our Country and Communities. All groups are affected, it may largely be the South East this year, but all groups have concerns that their Country is equally at risk.

There can be little doubt that there is a growing interest in, and recognition of, the need to build on and invest in the Indigenous knowledge of fire for managing Country. However, we emphasise that the rights and views of Traditional Owners must be respected and understood. Aboriginal people are part of their Country and we have a deep spiritual connection and responsibility to care for Country.

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations works across Victoria with Traditional Owner organisations.

In 2019, in partnership with the State government, the Federation led the development of a State-wide Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy, which sets out a pathway for strengthening Traditional Owners' role in managing Country.

To our knowledge this is the only example of a strategic State-wide approach, and the Federation is currently developing the associated implementation planning with Traditional Owner groups.

Importance of Cultural Fire practices

Cultural Fire has a range of associated outcomes including; hazard reduction, protection of life and property and ecological regeneration. However, we underline that Cultural Fire is not a silver bullet. It is not the simple answer to this complex question. But it is part of the long term transformational change to the management of Country. We exist in a changed environment and must draw on the 65,000 plus years of Traditional Owner experience managing Country combined with the modern tools and systems available today.

We strongly believe that working together with other Land managers and communities we can influence and improve how Country is managed, including how fire is used on Country. Caring for Country is an obligation that is handed down generation by generation. Adequate resourcing and authority is needed to give effect to this and to contribute to the sustainability and productivity of all Country.

Our Focus

A key focus for us in the coming weeks is to hold a forum of Victorian Traditional Owner leaders, to build on the work to date and develop a range of strategies and options. It will look to the transformational changes required, as well as the immediate needs of communities.

There needs to be long term transformational change in practices, decision-making infrastructure and integration of indigenous knowledge systems and western science towards holistic management of Country.

Some Traditional Owner groups have established crews that contribute to the emergency response, as well as the on-going management of Country including through cultural burning. The implementation of the Strategy will need long-term support and resourcing for further development of knowledge, practice and capacity in Traditional Owner groups to undertake cultural fire practice and to ensure operational feasibility of cultural burning in a changed environment.

There also needs to be resourcing now to enable each group to engage and support the planning of future pathways forward. There is a concern that groups may not be in a position to respond to the immediate need for information and contribution to on-going inquiries or government program and policy considerations, and will not have the opportunity to bring their perspectives to the table.

Embedding cultural burning practices needs government agencies to better understand, recognise and work with Traditional Owners, as authorities in their own regions on their Country. This needs to be systematic and there is now an opportunity to develop the authority and organisational infrastructure that can integrate and collaborate with broader agencies to evolve practices that improve the resilience of Country.