

Opinion

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A burden that must be shared

WHY is regional Victoria footing the entire \$500 million cost of ensuring our powerlines never spark another Black Saturday?

Premier Daniel Andrews and Energy Minister Lily D'Ambrosio would do well to remember that it's not just country Victorians who carry the scars of Black Saturday, February 7, 2009.

Yet the Andrews Government has lumped the cost of its Electricity Safety (Bushfire Mitigation) Amendment Regulations on to the customers of regional Victoria's two electricity distributors — Powercor and AusNet, with a very small cost imposed on Jemena customers.

Melburnians living in Citipower's and United Energy's densely packed distribution areas will contribute nothing.

If ever there was an argument for socialising the cost of a "public good" it's the one that faces us every summer — protecting the state from catastrophic fires.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission recommended "the state" mitigate the risk of powerlines causing fires, given they sparked infernos that were responsible for 70 per cent of Black Saturday's 173 fatalities.

How, then, does Ms D'Ambrosio explain to someone living in Wodonga or Wangaratta that they will have to pay to fund powerline upgrades at Warrandyte?

Yet Templestowe families 6km from Warrandyte pay nothing.

The Labor Government has enthusiastically socialised the cost of securing Victoria against our other great scourge — drought. Every Victorian pays an environmental contribution levy on their water bills.

The Andrews Government should ensure we all contribute to securing our state against both drought and fire, wherever we live.

Removal of native vegetation has many benefits - it should not be so difficult

Time we clear the air



Government continually places hurdles before farmers as they try to improve their land, says **DAVID JOCHINKE**

THE Victorian Government has forfeited a golden opportunity to overhaul an unworkable native vegetation management system. Instead, it seems intent on hardwiring the inherent failings of a system that has not achieved the successful management of Victoria's native vegetation.

The state government's draft native vegetation clearing regulations are merely a list of minor amendments tinkering around the edges of a significantly bigger problem.

Instead of real, positive change, the government is continuing to lumber layers of complexity into the regulations, which is serving only to confuse and frustrate landholders who are trying to do the right thing.

The system isn't designed to improve the quality of native vegetation, but to "protect at all costs" existing trees in the landscape. This rigid ap-



Uphill battle: Native vegetation laws can prove a hindrance for farmers.

proach only stands to further drive decline across the landscape.

Farmers aren't changing the use of the land. There is sometimes a need for the strategic removal of trees to be able to adopt new technologies, such as larger-scale farm machinery. In re-

turn, farmers are willing to replant and protect other areas of vegetation to offset any removal that may have occurred.

But instead of a simple model of undertaking an assessment, native vegetation management is clouded in

complexity and expense, and is highly time-consuming for a farmer.

Our members have put forward ideas for a separate control for agriculture to recognise the importance of the primary use of the land — farming — to the Victorian economy and the social and economic wellbeing of our regions.

A simple formula should be in place to allow patches of trees to be fenced and regenerated and encourage fence-line planting to provide habitat for fauna as strategic offsets for the removed vegetation.

The farming community is increasingly expected to provide ecological outcomes on private land, for the benefit of the community, without compensation. Exemptions apply to residential land and for bushfires. Why should there not be similar exemptions for our food and fibre producers?

Farmers understand what makes a healthy landscape — the 30-year anniversary of Landcare is testament to this. Its success is written on the landscape — farmland is one of the few areas where vegetation cover has increased.

These endeavours should be supported by Government, rather than penalising the state's frontline environmentalists.

• **David Jochinke is Victorian Farmers Federation president**

Rail freight needs its own dedicated minister

I, LIKE many in the rail freight sector, was caught by surprise by V/Line's move to cease running trains any time the temperature exceeds 33C.

This decision came without notice, without consultation and with no regard to the broader economic impact.

While I agree that safety is paramount, a unilateral declaration of this magnitude is unworkable and unmanageable at the peak of what is Victoria's best harvest this decade.

These changes are a poor response from a government agency that appears to be making decisions without any understanding of the Victorian transport system and highlight the under-investment and neglect of Vic-



Closing down rail in hot weather speaks of systemic failure, writes **REID MATHER**

toria's rail system by successive governments.

This stems from an overcomplicated system: we have two ministers (Jacinta Allan and Luke Donnellan), and five government agencies managing the network (Department of Treasury and Finance, Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, VicTrack, V/Line and Public Transport Victoria), and four separate access providers (VicTrack, V/Line, Metro Trains and Australian

Rail Track Corporation). There is no unified management or regional representation in relation to marketing rail freight.

So what's the solution? It's simple. Victoria needs a dedicated rail freight minister.

Victoria also needs a rail freight facilitation authority, a statutory authority reporting directly to the dedicated minister, which works to effect a whole-of-government approach to rail freight across the state.

The State Government must also adopt a Victorian transport plan, which is required by law under the Transport Integration Act, and which would guide policy and investment.

The Government often talks about using the best of our regions, but it's time to put that into action. This debacle crystallises all that's wrong with how it handles the rail freight sector.

The Government has a social and economic responsibility to the Victorian community to provide a workable solution. One that recognises rail freight is the only real option for moving large stock in peak periods.

• **Reid Mather is executive officer of the Rail Freight Alliance**

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