



River Red Gum parks or cow paddocks?

There have been continued calls for the return of cattle to Victoria's River Red Gum national parks to reduce fire risk.

While such a move has been ruled out for the next term of government by Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu and deputy premier Peter Ryan, interest groups continue to seek inappropriate access for cattle to the national parks.

Read on to see why this is a flawed strategy.

Are cattle good for fuel reduction in Barmah National Park?

There is no scientific evidence to suggest that cattle will benefit fuel reduction in the Barmah National Park. Even the Department of Sustainability and Environment, which manages fire risks on public land, has declared that cattle are not an effective tool for fuel reduction.

With appropriate levels of environmental water large parts of the Barmah will be wetter for longer periods in most years.

Strategic burning can be a far more effective fuel mitigation tool, but has been consistently opposed by local graziers and advocates of cattle grazing on public land.

The Victorian National Parks Association supports strategic fuel reduction burns based on sound ecological research with ongoing monitoring and clear ecological goals.

Cattle grazing of Barmah wetlands has historically



A dead cow polluting the Goulburn River near Shepparton.

favoured a small number of exclusive landholders who pay a fraction of commercial rates compared to some of their neighbours and other farmers in the region.

Cattle grazing in the Barmah will damage sensitive wetland vegetation, pollute water quality, spread weeds, and do little to alleviate fire risks.

Does cattle grazing have any effect on reducing fuel loads?

The Department of Sustainability and Environment doesn't think so. Its River Red Gum Forest Ecological Grazing Strategy says:

On floodplain forests, grazing is no longer considered to be an effective tool for fuel reduction. The grazing intensity required to significantly reduce the threat of wildfire would have detrimental effects on forest values.

– 2005 River Red Gum Forest Ecological Grazing Strategy. Department of Sustainability & Environment, DSE



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Cattle have caused erosion and pollution on public streams near Numurkah.

DSE regional fire managers believe cattle grazing in the Barmah Forest does not reduce the fire hazard.

In media interviews in 2009 DSE northeast fire manager Peter Farrell said:

“Cattle grazing has little impact on the bushfire risk in forests as cattle do not eat branches, twigs, bark and eucalyptus leaves, which are the main flammable fuels.”

Does the science justify re-introducing cattle grazing into red gum parks?

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council conducted Australia’s largest and most comprehensive investigation into River Red Gum wetland forests. It found that:

... scientific evidence indicates that in general it (grazing) adversely affects natural values especially biodiversity, water quality and soil condition. Accordingly, VEAC recommends that domestic stock grazing be generally excluded from public land in the investigation area ...

– VEAC River Red Gum Forests Investigation (final report 2008)

Is the call for a return of cattle to red gum parks for fuel reduction fair dinkum?

We don’t think so. You be the judge.

The VNPA has long supported fuel reduction and ecological burns in River Red Gum forests, but these

calls have been resisted by logging and cattle grazing interests.

In a 2007 submission to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Riverine Red Gum Forests Investigation, the Barmah Forest Preservation League, a group supporting grazing, said:

“Because river red gum is a heat sensitive eucalypt the League does not support fuel reduction burning in the Barmah forest. Cool burns will kill young trees and badly scar older ones.”

– 2007 VEAC submission, Peter Newman, Barmah Forest Preservation League

Peter Newman is also a member of the Barmah Cattlemen’s Association and a spokesman for the Rivers and Red Gum Environmental Alliance, a group backed by grazing and logging interests.

National parks managed as cow paddocks undermine internationally agreed criteria for sound conservation management of protected areas.

Parks are there for their conservation value and protection of threatened plants and animals, and provide enormous amenity value to many thousands of visitors every year.

National parks are not cow paddocks.