

Friday 5 January, 2007

## **PERMANENT FIREBREAKS TO MEET INCREASED FIRE THREAT**

Acting Premier John Thwaites today announced the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the CFA would establish permanent firebreaks to protect Melbourne's water catchments.

"A pilot project for permanent fire protection in the Otways is already underway and other locations to protect key assets in high risk areas will also be considered," Mr Thwaites said.

"Predictions that this summer's severe fire conditions were likely to continue in future years meant new fire preparedness measures had to be put in place."

Mr Thwaites also announced payroll tax exemptions for businesses that have employees away from work as volunteer firefighters and warned the State faced another high risk fire period heading into the weekend.

"I would appeal to holiday makers heading to regional Victoria to be careful not to add to the fire risk – particularly holiday makers heading to the Otways and Great Ocean Road region over coming weeks."

Mr Thwaites said below average rainfall in Victoria over the past decade coupled with increasing temperatures due to climate change had increased the fire risk across the State.

"As an added measure to meet this risk, DSE and CFA will establish strategic permanent firebreaks around Melbourne's water catchments, continue work on permanent protection in the Otways and investigate other possible locations."

For example, sections of the containment line constructed to protect the Thomson Reservoir during the fires in the past month will be included in a permanent firebreak.

Decisions about the firebreaks are being made in consultation with DSE, CFA, Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water.

Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin said the creation of strategic firebreaks, complemented by fuel reduction burning where possible, would help make towns and other important community assets safer from fire.

"The decision to create strategic permanent firebreaks to protect towns and other important community assets is a good decision," Mr Esplin said.

Mr Thwaites said permanent firebreaks in the Otways would complement the protection zones already being created around settlements in the region.

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“Like the protection zones being established around settlements in the Otways, permanent firebreaks would reduce the threat of fire,” Mr Thwaites said.

Mr Thwaites said the strengthening of strategic firebreaks throughout the Otways was part of a pilot program to reduce fire risk to towns and settlements in the coastal strip from Anglesea to Kennett River.

“This year these works will create a permanent 38 kilometre fire break up to 40 metres wide by removing vegetation around six urban areas along the Otways coast from Kennett River to Anglesea.”

Any impacts on native vegetation will be addressed according to the *Native Vegetation Framework*, which may require vegetation removal to be offset through other DSE activities.

Work started last week at the pilot site of Big Hill, with work at other sites to commence shortly.

The Bracks Government will provide employers with payroll tax exemption in relation to employees away from work as volunteer firefighters or responding to other emergencies, effective from 1 November 2006.

The tax exemption will take in Country Fire Authority and VicSES volunteers, responding to fires and other emergencies, such as storm damage, flooding, and search and rescue.

“The response of Victorians to this summer’s bushfires has been truly extraordinary,” Mr Thwaites said.

“For every act of selflessness at the fire front or emergency scenes, there is an equal act of selflessness by the friends, families and – in many cases – employers supporting our volunteers.

“I thank all employers for their understanding, particularly during this long, hot bushfire season.”

The exemption applies to employees not on official leave. It will compensate those employers who normally pay payroll tax for loss of paid work time, if employees are forced away from their workplaces to respond to emergencies.

For more information, employers should go to the State Revenue Office website [www.sro.vic.gov.au](http://www.sro.vic.gov.au) or call 13 21 61