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Alternative fuel reduction methods needed to avoid tragic bushfires

Difficult lessons should be learnt by Australia from the tragic loss of more than 60 lives in the current catastrophic bushfires in Portugal, to fully explore alternative fuel reduction methods, the Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA) said today. Australia's thoughts are with Portugal and it is a sombre reminder of tragic bushfires in Victoria and other parts of Australia over the last few years.

AFPA Chief Executive Officer, Mr Ross Hampton, said it was time Australia fully embraced that there is more than one way to reduce fuel loads in our bush. Fuel reduction burning has its place, but so does strategically applied 'mechanical fuel removal', a widely accepted bushfire mitigation tool which we are just beginning to utilise in Australia.

"Australia is the seventh most forested nation on earth and our population often live adjacent to, or even surrounded, by bush. Bushfires are inevitable. Our forest industries understand this and keep fire suppression crews on 24-hour standby over summer months," Mr Hampton said.

"However, each year we still lose tens of thousands of hectares of trees – trees which in some cases have grown for decades and would have supplied renewable, green building materials and supported many regional jobs. That is why AFPA is calling for a far greater focus on mechanical fuel reduction in strategic locations to help mitigate wild bushfires."

The Federal and State governments are currently conducting a \$1.5 million 'Mechanical Fuel Removal Pilot Program' in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia. These trials will reveal how a combination of machinery removal of fuel with burning off, in strategic zones, can reduce the severity of fires.

"The trials are a welcome first step, but arguably the existing evidence already makes a compelling case for mechanical fuel reduction to be embedded in a national bushfire mitigation strategy. AFPA urges the Federal and State governments to complete the trials urgently and for a much larger program to be initiated," Mr Hampton said.

In the United States, for example, there is a 10 year, \$400 million program into mechanical fuel reduction to improve forest health and reduce bushfire risk. A report by [Deloitte Access Economics \(DAE\)](#) into the economics of 'mechanical fuel removal' found that removing fuel from the bush, in combination with fuel reduction burning, could dramatically reduce the damage caused by bushfires and save the community tens of millions of dollars each year. AFPA's recent policy proposal '[Can We Better Fire-proof Our Country Towns?](#)' details the case for strategic mechanical fuel reduction and was prompted by the loss of the whole town of Yarloop in Western Australia in a bushfire in January 2016.

AFPA represents forest growers, harvesters, and manufacturers of timber and paper products.

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