

Thinning forests no defence against fires

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Credit: Elizabeth Donoghue/ Flickr

Having logging machines "thin" forest for fire reduction is largely ineffective, a new peer-reviewed, scientific study has found.

The study, led by researchers at The Australian National University and published in the journal *Conservation Letters*, compared fire severity in unthinned versus thinned [forest](#) burned in the 2009 wildfires. It covered two [forest types](#)—mixed [species](#) forest and ash forest.

The [scientific evidence](#) showed that across almost every forest age and type, thinning made little difference. It actually increased the likelihood of a crown burn in older, mixed species forests, and slightly reduced the chance of crown burn in younger aged, mixed species forest.

Lead author Dr. Chris Taylor, from the ANU Fenner School of Environment and Society, said thinning made very little difference to fire severity.

"The impact of thinning varied with forest type, the age of the forest and fire conditions," Dr. Taylor said.

"Across most forest types and ages, thinning had little impact on forest fire severity, although it did worsen severity in mixed species forest aged 70 years plus and did reduce it in mixed species forest aged 20-40 years. Overall, the evidence indicates thinning forests does not reduce fire risk."

The study also found 20- to 40- year old forest was more likely to suffer crown burn than 70-year-old forest. It also suggested more study could still be done on the topic.

"A previous report found thinning of forests increased fire risk," Dr. Taylor said. "And multiple previous studies have also found fire severity is lower in older, undisturbed and unlogged forests."

Dr. Taylor also noted previous Silvicultural Guides to control forest growth for Victoria and Tasmania have stated thinning would produce an "increase in [fire](#) hazard" due to "high fuel loads."

More information: Chris Taylor et al. Does forest thinning reduce fire severity in Australian eucalypt forests?, *Conservation Letters* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/conl.12766](https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12766)

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