"From the Fire Front"

The Australian Workers’ Union

Submissions on the

2018/2019 Tasmanian Bushfires

"The STRATEGIC risk of not preparing potential firegrounds is far more serious than the TACTICAL risk of doing so".

Roger Underwood
The Tasmanian Government has established an Independent Review into the 2018-19 bushfires, with broad terms of reference, and called for submissions.

The following is a submission from the AWU, which represents firefighters “on the ground”.

These firefighters are the Parks Service Fire Crew.

OVERVIEW

PART A – FIRE FIGHTING

The management of wild fires was found wanting.

The policy “Hit them fast and hit them hard” was not put into practice.

The IMT was unresponsive to the requirements of crews on the ground.

Communications were found wanting.

Aerial support is of limited value in fighting fires in forested areas.

PART B – FIRE PREVENTION

Fighting wildfire requires a special, dedicated and permanent team of Remote Area Firefighters.

This team should be under separate management to the TFS, as the skillset is specialised and is different to the approach taken by the TFS on urban and grass fires.

The skillset involves fire mitigation, including fuel reduction burning, during the off-season, and being on standby to fight fires in the fire season.

When on standby during the fire season, helicopters should be available for the rapid deployment of fire crews.
The team needs to be manned appropriately as a permanent workforce. At present, a fire fighting team of 18 is augmented with a seasonal group of 20. These should be made permanent.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fires occur when four factors exist: sufficient fuel, appropriate weather conditions (heat and wind), oxygen and an ignition source (lightning, arson or carelessness). Fuel is the only variable that human activity can influence reliably - reduce the available fuel load and modify its distribution in the landscape and you reduce the severity of a wildfire event.

The ongoing application of effective fire management strategies will depend on effective, integrated and well-maintained infrastructure (access roads and bridges, water access, emergency meeting points, etc); targeted prescribed burning regimes; and the availability of competent, highly-trained and experienced personnel with local knowledge. If fire management capability is reduced, there inevitably will be an increase in wildfires and far greater damage to community and forest values as fires which would once have been controllable, become uncontrollable.

The only strategy in Australian history that has proven to be successful in minimising bushfire damage resulting from forest fires, is one which incorporates systematic fuel reduction burning, at an appropriate scale and frequency.

Wild Fire is a constant threat, and requires permanent attention and management.

To reduce the incidence of - and to properly manage - fire in wild areas, requires an ongoing commitment to fuel reduction. As such, fire mitigation is an essential tool in a broader fire management policy, and it involves a continuing and continual approach.
The Fire Crew members in the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) in Tasmania are career specialist bush firefighters, dedicated to the protection and maintenance of Tasmania’s crown and reserve estate and related assets. They provide front line specialist firefighting protection to Tasmania’s regional towns, property, land and reserves.

The crew are not JUST firefighters. They are involved in a range of land management practices throughout the year, including track maintenance.

PWS Fire Crew Members are a state-wide firefighting and fire maintenance resource. There are designated Fire Crews at depots across Tasmania, including Hobart, Prospect, Ulverstone and Scottsdale. The Fire Crew works as a dedicated and highly trained fire crew, operating at the direction of State Fire Management for Tasmania Parks and Wildlife, within the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

The PWS Fire Crew, along with the Department, work closely with other Tasmanian Agencies when fires and emergencies arise including the Tasmanian Fire Service, Sustainable Timber Tasmania and the State Emergency Service.

Parks has an on-the-ground fire crew to oversight parks management, and it now has a permanent crew of 18 positions, trained in remote area fire fighting and fuel reduction techniques, which is supplemented by a further 20 during the fire season. At present, 5 of those permanent positions remain unfilled.

The Tasmanian Forests Agreement resulted is a significant transfer of land and reserves from the former Forestry Tasmania to the Parks and wildlife service without any increase in the number of permanent fire crew in the Parks and Wildlife Service. Current numbers are insufficient to manage the increased hectarage, and leave the Iconic World Heritage Area vulnerable and exposed to the ongoing and increasing threat of Wildfire.
We are concerned that the Parks Service fuel reduction program, as a result of a lack of sufficient qualified personnel and funds, is not adequate to cope with the additional land and reserves transferred to the Parks and Wildlife Service.

Put simply our Iconic World Heritage Area needs permanent protection from the ongoing and increasing threat of wildfire. It needs a permanent solution to what is a permanent problem.

We believe the seasonal work force in the PWS should be offered employment security and be made permanent. Those additional resources would then be available to undertake an expanded and more comprehensive fuel reduction program, focussed on eco burns to protect the Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage Area and surrounding reserves.

Training, experience and knowledge are key to having a skilled and dedicated fire crew able to manage and contain Tasmanians ever increasing wildfire events. Ongoing and permanent employment will avoid the loss of skills and annual turnover of fire crew. An example of this is during the 2018/2019 fire season a number of seasonal workers left to take on permanent employment elsewhere.

Finally, we make the point that from an economic perspective, it is far better to spend a dollar on mitigation, with resources readily available, than it is to have to spend many millions of dollars on fighting a fire, particularly when it is beyond the capacity of available resources to manage it.

BACKGROUND

The AWU represents public sector bush fire fighters in Tasmania and across Australia. AWU Fire Crew members in the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) in Tasmania are career specialist bush firefighters, dedicated to the protection and maintenance of Tasmania’s crown and reserve estate and related assets. They
provide front line specialist firefighting protection to Tasmania’s World Heritage Area and crown reserves, regional towns, property, land and reserves.

The transfer of significant land volumes to the custodianship of the Parks and Wildlife Service under the Tasmanian Forests Agreement has taken place without any increase in the number of employees engaged permanently within the Fire crew. This has left the Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage area and reserves exposed and vulnerable to the ravages of wildfire as demonstrated by both the 2016 and now the 2018/2019 Tasmanian Bush Fires.

That Iconic World Heritage Area can be protected at relatively little financial cost through an increased dedicated resources focused on protecting the World Heritage Area and minimising potential risks to the greater community by the spread of wildfire form those areas.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2019, Tasmania experienced a number of major bushfires. In late December, and again on the evening of January 15, a series of dry lightning strikes occurred throughout Tasmania, setting alight over 70 fires, most of which were in remote or difficult terrain.

The circumstances were exacerbated not only by dry, windy and hot conditions, but also by a very high fuel load.

In all, over 200,000 hectares were burnt. Three in particular accounted for over 150,000 hectares and are the subject of this submission. One was the Gell River fire, which burnt through wilderness area near Lake Gordon, travelling eastwards to the Florentine River and threatening forest land, the Central Highlands fire, which started at Lake Fergus and then Little Pine Tier, and threatened Miena and Waddamana, and the third became known as the Riveaux Road fire, which burnt its way towards Geeveston, and all but destroyed the Tahune Airwalk and the Southwood timber processing complex.
The following table provides some data as to the extent of these fires (in hectares) and the land tenure burnt.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gell River</th>
<th>Central Plateau</th>
<th>Riveaux Road</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parks land</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest land</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>27,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Land</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>64,000</td>
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Source: Sustainable Timber Tasmania

All three fires started small, in remote area, as a result of lightning strikes, all three built up slowly, but having taken hold soon spread rapidly and were for a period out of control. All three started on variously-designated Crown land, including World Heritage areas, and all three posed significant threat to lives and property.

**In our view, all three were containable when they first began.**

The attached maps show the extent of the fires and the land tenure over which they crossed.

Significant resources, including resources from interstate and overseas, were brought to bear to fight these fires, which were eventually brought under control with no loss of life but significant damage to property and the Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage Area and reserves.

The fires had a devastating impact on the Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage Area which cannot be quantified in financial terms, but rather the loss of otherwise protected, unique and unreplaceable wilderness which contributes to Tasmania's reputation as a clean and green environment. The fires also had a significant
impact on our tourism industry and the broader economy in the middle of the peak tourism season, affecting iconic wilderness areas, walking tracks and national parks.

The loss of property, assets and the cost of fighting these fires is still being determined, but the cost is expected to be well north of $100 million.

**WILDFIRE**

These fires were sometimes referred to as wild fires, and "wild fire" is an appropriate term to use.

Fire is an integral part of the landscape. This is not a new phenomenon. It is a fundamental truth, and should drive all fire policy. The Tasmanian landscape lends itself to fire, and has adapted to it.

As the Professor of Fire Ecology at the University of Tasmania David Bowman says, and he has made the point often:

"*We live in an inherently flammable environment*." ¹

A report into the 2016 bushfires in the Tasmanian World Heritage Area, authored by Dr Tony Press, and dated December 2016, noted:

*Bushfire has been a natural and persistent phenomenon in the TWWHA for millennia. ...*

*Large, landscape-scale bushfires have been reported as early as the 1850s for parts of the TWWHA.*

*Since the 1930s there have been at least 12 fires in or near the TWWHA that were greater than 20,000 hectares in size.* ²

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¹ David Bowman  Opinion piece, the Mercury January 11 2019
² Dr Tony Press, Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project Final Report, December 2016
Tasmania has experienced many such outbreaks. Again from the 2016 Report:

*In January and February 2016, Tasmania recorded thousands of lightning strikes, which started multiple fires in exceptionally dry climatic conditions.*

*From 13 January to 15 March 2016, a total of 145 vegetation fires affected approximately 126,800 hectares across Tasmania, including an estimated 19,800 hectares (around 1.3 per cent) of the TWWHA.*

As well as the World Heritage fire just mentioned, and the three under discussion in this paper, recent outbreaks have included the Zeehan fire this summer, the St Helens fire (December 2017), the Temma/Sisters Hills fire in 2016 and the Dunalley fire of January 2013. These are but the latest in a long line of wild fires that have caused or threatened to cause damage to life and property.

Wild fires typically start in the wilderness, in wild and rugged country, and are difficult to access. Most are the result of lightning strikes.

CSIRO bushfire behaviour and risks research team leader Andrew Sullivan makes the point that the danger with lightning fires is that they don’t “necessarily burst into flame straight away”. Once established they become difficult to contain, and can travel at great speed through bushland, destroying all in their path.

*“You get a smouldering reaction that is very slow but releases a fair bit of heat and it very progressively develops into a successful ignition”*

*“Across the country lightning strikes generally tend to occur in less accessible terrain, take longer to develop to the point where they can be spotted. “Which is why they cause such a problem because it’s very difficult for firefighters to get to. “Therefore, the fires have a greater chance to become a going fire that’s difficult to fight.”* 

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3 Ibid
4 Andrew Sullivan, as quoted in the Mercury article 10 February 2019
They are different to urban fires, and they require a different management approach. Not only a different approach to fighting such a fire, but also a recognition that fires in such a landscape require a particular approach to land management in their mitigation.

Any delay in fighting wild fires will only exacerbate the situation and will make fighting the fire later far more difficult. It is now universally recognised that swift action needs to be taken at the time of commencement of the outbreak, to avoid a more calamitous situation.

As stated in the findings of the 2016 report:

*Early fire detection and response time is critical for the successful delivery of any fire management program.*

A sentiment that was repeated recently by the Tasmanian Fire Controller Bruce Byatt who said:

*"We need to hit all new starts hard and fast".*

Fire might seem to be contained, but it can break out from “hot spots”, and thermal imaging is an important tool to determine the site of “hot spots”. The TFS fire incident controller on the Great Pine Tier fire, Mr Richardson, is reported as saying that the TFS uses thermal imaging equipment to locate hot spots, as conditions can sometimes help disguise and hide them.

However, finding them is just the beginning. In isolated areas, aerial support can be of great value. As Mr Richardson has said:

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5 Tony Press, op.cit.
6 Bruce Byatt, as quoted in the Mercury 3 January 2019
“Once we’ve located them we still have to get crews in, and given that it’s in a lot of inaccessible terrain means we need aircraft to fly our firefighters in on the ground...”

In the present fires aerial support was used extensively. It is valuable in spotting fires and in moving personnel to fire zones. It is most effective when a fire is small and has a low intensity, however it does require adequate communication with ground crews.

Aerial support has its limitations. It cannot be used at night, under windy conditions, or when the smoke from the fire is low and thick. It also has limitations depending on the fire itself, and the type of vegetation it is travelling through. Peat fires, and fires burning underneath an extensive canopy are obvious examples.

The TFS Operations Manager Mark Klop is reported as stating:

...aerial bombing was difficult in areas where tall trees with dense canopies stopped water from penetrating through to the ground fire.

Building fire breaks and backburning are also essential tools in the wild area fire fighters’ armoury once a fire takes hold, but the heavy equipment required needs to be available and deployable. As such, access, such as an available road network, is invaluable.

Further, once a fire is running, fire fighters need to take into account natural boundaries when determining where to deploy resources to maximum effect.

Using these tools requires specialist knowledge and specialist skills. It also involves the availability and use of the right type of equipment. Again, a different

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7 Richardson, as quoted in the Mercury 11 February 2019
8 Klop, as quoted in the Mercury 20 January
set of skills and equipment from an urban firefighting outfit, and a point made by us in our commentary on the UBS review.

**CONTROLLING WILD FIRE**

From the above, it is obvious that fighting a wild fire is quite different to controlling an urban fire. A fundamental fallacy is the belief that water can control fire, and it is behind the call for more water bombers. But water alone will not control wild fires this is something Australian foresters found out 100 years ago, and why the term “dry firefighting” was coined.

The only strategy in Australian history that has proven to be successful in minimising bushfire damage resulting from forest fires, is one which incorporates systematic fuel reduction burning, at an appropriate scale and frequency.

**MITIGATION**

To reduce the incidence of - and to properly manage - fire in wild areas, requires an ongoing commitment to fuel reduction. As such, fire mitigation is an essential tool in a broader fire management policy, and it involves a continuing and continual approach.

There have been two conflicting approaches to land management issues in the past concerning fire control. The key difference is between those who seek to practice “bushfire management”, and those who seek to practice “bushfire/emergency response”.

The former approach has been practiced by various parks and forest services throughout the country. It requires intensive management, and regular reduction on the fuel load, normally by having low heat fuel reduction burns. Under such a management approach any fire (even those burning under the worst weather conditions) will be easier, safer and cheaper to control.
The latter approach has been a minimalist approach, arguing that the natural values of the landscape would be damaged by too much human interference, and that we should “let nature take its course”. When fire does occur, then we will throw everything at it to control it. Such an approach might hold sympathy with some, but the end result is a build-up of fuel load over time so that if a fire does start, it will have an enormous amount of fuel at its disposal, and be far more difficult and expensive to contain.

It would be naïve in the extreme to allow the former view to hold sway in any ongoing approach to land management. The prospect of a drier and warmer climate only makes the argument for more intensive management more compelling.

In our submission into the proposed restructuring of Forestry Tasmania, back in 2012, we said:

Based on past history, Tasmania can expect, on average, a devastating regional scale fire every 40 years or so. Mega-Fires occurred in 1898, 1934 and 1967. ⁹...

Fires occur when four factors exist: sufficient fuel, appropriate weather conditions (heat and wind), oxygen and an ignition source (lightning, arson or carelessness). Fuel is the only variable that human activity can influence reliably- reduce the available fuel load and modify its distribution in the landscape and you reduce the severity of a wildfire event. ¹⁰

All fires begin as a small fire, and increase in intensity and area where adequate fuel, oxygen and weather conditions exist. Many fires do not threaten life or property as they naturally extinguish, or are quickly contained and

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⁹ Mega-Fires are fires that exceed all efforts at control, regardless of the type, kind, or number of firefighting resources deployed. These fires represent only 0.1% of all forest fires, yet account for 95% of the area burnt and 85% of the total fire suppression costs. They often burn into the urban interface zones. Bartlett et al, 2007, The Mega-Fire Phenomenon: Some Australian Perspectives. IFA Conference.

extinguished. However, the reality is that all fires have the capacity to become uncontrolled events. The risk of such is reduced where suitable detection and suppression capacity exists...¹¹

Active forest management is more likely to result in reduced adverse impacts on life, community assets and forest values than fires which occur under a regime of passive land management. Successful fire management incorporates strategies for prevention of, preparedness for, suppression of, and recovery from wildfires.

The 2009 Victorian bushfires highlighted how the accumulation of fuel, resulting from passive management, reduced prescribed burning (often related to smoke management concerns), and conservation philosophies combined with increased urbanisation to result an intensification of fire extent and severity. ¹²

The ongoing application of effective fire management strategies will depend on effective, integrated and well-maintained infrastructure (access roads and bridges, water access, emergency meeting points, etc); targeted prescribed burning regimes; and the availability of competent, highly-trained and experienced personnel with local knowledge. If fire management capability is reduced, there inevitably will be an increase in wildfires and far greater damage to community and forest values as fires which would once have been controllable, become uncontrollable. ¹³

The experiences in mainland States has demonstrated that incorporating/transferring State forest assets into the reserve estate is invariably accompanied by a withdrawal of active forest and fire management. The impact of these changes has been well documented. For example, the

¹¹ ibid p12
¹² ibid p12
Esplin Inquiry into the 2002-03 Victorian Bushfire acknowledge this trend, noting it there was “either a reduction in resources for the delivery of burn programs (for example, a reduction to staff numbers and budget) and/or a strategic diversion of resources to other activities deemed to be more important”.  

In a hard-hitting article in a recent issue of Quadrant, respected WA forester Roger Underwood makes the following observations:

Fire is to the Australian bush as are the waves and tides to Australian seaweeds and marine life. It is the absence of fire, especially of mild fire, that is the real threat to the Australian bush, because the inevitable result is a landscape-level holocaust, from which it might take a century or more for recovery.

He refers to an over-reliance on technology when he writes:

...serious bushfire is like a disease that is incubated over many years; good land management is the preventative medicine that ensures the disease does not become a killer epidemic.

In recent years many Australian bushfire authorities have been seduced by the siren call of technology. This has lured them into a fatal trap. Their assumption is that any fire can be contained so long as they get it early and then have enough hardware to throw at it. This approach arose in the United States in the years after World War II, and is thus known to Australian land managers as “the American Approach”.

And we refer specifically to this point:

Adoption of the American approach has been accompanied by an equally disastrous institutional re-arrangement: the progressive transfer of bushfire

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14 Ibid p13
15 Roger Underwood Bushfire Management: Wisdom versus Folly. In Quadrant Online, February 2019
16 Ibid
responsibilities on crown lands from land management agencies to the emergency services.

In this scenario, beloved of politicians and the Bushfire generals, the focus of funding is shifted from preparedness and damage mitigation to emergency response. What this means in practice is less emphasis on fuel reduction and more on building up fleets of water-bombers, tankers, and other high tech firefighting gizmos, an enormous paramilitary force (overseen by technocrats in Head Office) whose function is to put out fires after they start ... but which is doomed to failure whenever they are faced with multiple fires burning in heavy fuels under hot windy conditions. 17

Underwood underlines the appropriate approach to land management

The need for mitigation of bushfire damage through fuel reduction by prescribed burning is absolutely central to effective bushfire management in dryland Australia [7]....

...while fuel reduction by prescribed burning does not prevent bushfires, it ensures fires do less damage, and it makes them easier, cheaper and safer to extinguish. In gambler's terms, it shortens the odds in favour of the firefighter. In human terms, it means people living in bushland areas where fuels have been reduced, are less likely to be burnt to death than are people living amongst heavy fuels.

...

Therefore, the first rule of land management in Australia is this: get your bushfire management right, or be prepared to lose the lot....
Our parks and forests agencies must be empowered and resourced to manage fuels, indeed they must be required to do so, if necessary by legislation. ¹⁸

We are concerned that the Parks service fuel reduction program, as a result of a lack of sufficient qualified personnel and funds, is not adequate to cope with the additional land transferred to the Parks and Wildlife Service as a result of the Tasmanian Forests Agreement.

Professor Bowman also makes the point in a number of recent popular press articles that changing weather conditions has required a rethink into reducing fuel load in our parks and reserves. He acknowledges that the "leave it alone" approach is no longer applicable. And yet, somewhat equivocally, he also notes (Mercury, Jan 11) that reducing fuel load also has its risks.

Yet fuel management is also an imperfect tool that cannot completely eliminate the risk of destructive wildfires. Planned burning always carries the risk of escapes, and a significant adverse effect is smoke pollution that can affect vulnerable health, degrade visibility and without care negatively affect biodiversity. ¹⁹

Finally, we make the point that from an economic perspective, it is far better to spend a dollar on mitigation, with resources readily available, than it is to have to spend many millions of dollars on fighting a fire, particularly when it is beyond the capacity of available resources to manage it.

PRESENT ARRANGEMENTS

Forest land under the control of the Tasmanian forest service (formerly FT, now STT) is, or rather was, managed intensively. Fire prevention was an integral part of that activity. The forest service had permanent crews with specialist

¹⁸ ibid
¹⁹ Bowman op.cit
equipment managing the land, building access roads and carrying out fuel reduction burns as and when necessary.

The present protocol is for individual land managers to manage land under their control. It is our understanding that under the current interagency arrangement, if an outbreak occurs, the nearest fire crew calls it in and acts as a first responder. From there, the ongoing management and control for the fire is managed by the responsible land manager, and it is their call as to what resources, personnel, fire crews, equipment, are required from that point on.

If the fire escalates and is deemed to represent a risk, control is transferred to the Tasmanian Fire Service, which then establishes an Incident Management Team (IMT).

A driving force in making such determinations is to ensure the protection of lives and property. This can lead to tensions with fire fighting crews when a tactical approach “on the ground” is over-ridden by a strategic approach to fighting the fire. We suspect that will always be the case, but we believe that generally, the person-in-charge on the ground has a better understanding of what is required.

The introduction of the Tasmanian Forest Agreement caused a change in the nature of land management, when the responsibility for large tracts of land was passed over from Forestry Tasmania to the Parks Service without any increase in the number of permanent fire crew within the Parks and Wildlife service. Current numbers are insufficient to manage the increased hectarage and leave the Iconic World Heritage Area vulnerable and exposed to the ongoing and increasing threat of Wildfire.

Parks has an on-the-ground fire crew to oversight parks management, and it now has a permanent crew of 18 positions, trained in remote area fire fighting and fuel reduction techniques, which is supplemented by a further 20 during the fire season. At present, 5 of those permanent positions remain unfilled.
In our submission to the Inquiry into the Review of the Fire Service Act 1979 we made the following observation regarding the skills of these crews:

The ...Fire Crew members in the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) in Tasmania are career specialist bush firefighters, dedicated to the protection and maintenance of Tasmania’s crown and reserve estate and related assets. They provide front line specialist firefighting protection to Tasmania’s regional towns, property, land and reserves.

PWS Fire Crew Members are a state-wide firefighting and fire maintenance resource. There are designated Fire Crews at depots across Tasmania, including Hobart, Prospect, Ulverstone and Scottsdale. The Fire Crew works as a dedicated and highly trained fire crew, operating at the direction of State Fire Management for Tasmania Parks and Wildlife, within the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment. The PWS Fire Crew, along with the Department, work closely with other Tasmanian Agencies when fires and emergencies arise including the Tasmanian Fire Service, Sustainable Timber Tasmania and the State Emergency Service.

Role and Responsibility

PWS Fire Crew members are usually the first to respond to fires in regional areas and are the specialist, highly trained, front line bush firefighters who deal with wild and dangerous situations each fire season. PWS Fire Crew Members have acted to save and protect many Tasmanian towns and assets for many decades across the State of Tasmania. There have been many major fire emergencies and incidents that PWS Fire Crew members have responded to and managed. More recently these include but are not limited to, the West Coast complex of fires, the Dunalley fires, East Coast fires and Lake Burbury fire.

...
PWS Fire Crew Members also conduct regular and routine fuel reduction burning and track maintenance, ensuring as far as possible Tasmania is able and ready to fight the next wild fire that could cause loss of property or life across Tasmania.  

It is our submission that this dedicated, specialist and skilled team should remain within the administration of the Parks Service.

Even with that issue addressed an inadequate resourcing of the fire crew means the necessary fuel reductions to protect the Iconic World Heritage Area will leave our focus on expensive fire suppression rather than the more effective mitigation of the problem. Put simply our Iconic World Heritage Area needs permanent protection from the ongoing and increasing threat of wildfire. It needs an ongoing solution to what is a permanent problem.

We believe the seasonal work force in the PWS should be offered employment security and be made permanent. Those additional resources would then be available to undertake an expanded and more comprehensive fuel reduction program, focussed on eco burns to protect the Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage Area and surrounding reserves. Training, experience and knowledge are key to having a skilled and dedicated fire crew able to manage and contain Tasmanians ever increasing wild fire events. On-going and permanent employment will avoid the loss of skills and annual turnover of fire crew. An example of this is during the 2018/2019 fire season a number of seasonal workers left to take on permanent employment elsewhere.

\[\text{AWU Submission into the Review of the Fire Service Act 1979, 2018}\]
THE THREE FIRES – OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIRE FRONT

All of the above is well-known by all parties and is essentially repeated here for emphasis. However, the question remains as to how this knowledge translated into practice.

The Gell River fire

This fire started on 28 December 2018 on land that is designated World Heritage. The area is managed by the Parks Service. Fire travelled south east through World Heritage Area towards the boundary of forest land in the Florentine Valley. It burnt through 33,000 hectares of ground, much of which was button grass.

When the fire began, it was containable. However, the absence of fixed wing aircraft on the first day as spotter aircraft was an inhibiting factor. A fixed wing aircraft could have been despatched to review the fire ground, but none were available with many of them working the Sydney Hobart yacht race.

Helicopters were also unavailable for the same reason. A fire crew was at Maydena but had no helicopter assigned to it. One helicopter was eventually dispatched as a spotter aircraft to examine the fire, but had to fly from Hobart and on understanding the nature of the fire, then had to fly back to Maydena to pick up a ground crew. This caused a delay in getting troops on the ground. Once the crew were on the ground, and with the weather assisting, they were able to contain the fire, with the helicopter now carrying water.

On 31 December the crew requested new thermal imaging to determine hot spots, as they were concerned the IR scan data was 3 days old and spots may have been missed. Their view was that the fire would be worth a recheck before the incident was downscaled and aircraft released to other sites by the IMT. The fire crew were advised that such a service would not be available until the following day, and two of the three aircraft were released. By the following day, it was too late for thermal imaging as the fire had broken through its boundary.
Two small-payload helicopters were still available (an extra chopper had come up from Hobart) and were helping fire crews. However, the call went out for more aerial support. The two larger payload helicopters that had been sent away were recalled. However one retired early due to a lack of fuel and the other could not be used when it became apparent that its bucket needed to be decontaminated. (The bucket had collected water from Lake Sorell, and that lake had the invasive fish species carp).

The contract for aerial work had been determined at a national level, which meant that available local resources were overlooked or otherwise not deployed or kept on stand-by.

Once the fire reached the button grass plain, which incidentally had been burnt some years before, and with the weather having taken a turn for the worse (heat and wind), it became unstoppable.

Some three weeks later, wild area fire fighters from interstate were dispatched to assist fight this fire, which had now spread widely. Some of these crews were essentially volunteers, and were unfamiliar in dealing with air support and wild area fire fighting techniques. Valuable time was lost while experienced personnel were diverted to provide both preliminary and ongoing training for these folk. What was valuable was the presence of paramedics within some of those teams.

By the time the fire was eventually contained, it had burnt through 33,000 hectares.

The Central Plateau fire

The Fire that consumed the Central Plateau started at Lake Fergus on Parks land on the night of January 15 and once established, travelled rapidly towards Little Pine Tier, and then on to Miena, and then further east and south. It burnt across land of mixed tenure.

When it was finally resolved, it had burnt through 55,000 hectares.
When it was finally resolved, it had burnt through 55,000 hectares.

This fire was also arguably containable. The fire commenced in inaccessible country, but no aircraft made an immediate assessment. Thus the fire was allowed to burn for a period without the proper attention being given to it. Eventually it got away.

There were a number of opportunities to carry out backburns, but to do so, permission had to be granted, and in many cases it was too late coming. By this time, the TFS had established an Incident Management Team (IMT), and it was within this chain of command that such permissions were granted. On three separate occasions, the fire had broken through intended backburn sites by the time approval was given.

The IMT seemed to lack knowledge of local conditions, and were not prepared to accept the advice of the fire crews on the ground. It was obvious to those on the ground that the IMT was slow to respond. It was certainly not seeking, or rather acting on, intel from the ground. Whether this was through inexperience, or simply being risk-averse, the end result was that instead of thinking proactively about the fire front, it was reacting to it. It was obvious that the IMT were not used to accepting risk when it came to backburning. As one member of the IMT is reported to have said – he was not willing to make a “career-defining decision”.

Helicopters were not allowed to fly in the early morning. Choppers were not in the air until after 9am, when in fact they were needed at first light. In one situation, the chopper pilot was not able to communicate with the ground crew, as he had not been advised of the appropriate protocols, channels etc. Communications from the ground crew had to go through an air attack supervisor (AAS), but for periods the supervisor was uncontactable. Further efforts were made through the IMT, which had to also go through the AAS. It is not known whether the AAS ever received the request to advise the pilot of the appropriate channels.
The end result was that the decision had to be made to withdraw ground crews from the fire flanks as a safety measure and to let the fire go.

Later requests were made to establish fire breaks and carry out backburning, but the delays in the provision of fire-fighting units (water carriers) made such activity unachievable.

**The Riveaux Road Fire**

This fire was in fact a merging of a number of smaller fires. Some started on land that was designated World Heritage, and burnt through button grass, while three smaller fires on forest land were quickly contained. However the main culprit began on deferred forest land, near the junction of the Picton and Huon Rivers. It then travelled rapidly eastwards through forest land. It burnt through 27,000 hectares of an amount of forest estate, 12,000 hectares of which was production forest. It destroyed a veneer mill complex at Southwood, and seriously threatened Judbury, Castle Forbes Bay, Geeveston and other towns and settlements on the western bank of the Huon River. It burnt through 64,000 hectares.

This fire was also containable when it first began. However, a senior and experienced Divisional Commander was, against his advice, removed from this fire in the early stages to attend the Gell River fire, and the duties taken over by a less-experienced Sector Commander, who spent some time coming to understand this fire.

Once the fire broke across the Picton River, it spread rapidly. It was by now being managed by the TFS. The policy was one of setting up containment lines, and opportunities to carry out backburning were not taken. Locals with heavy equipment were not utilised, and it soon became a policy of watch and wait, as distinct from taking a more proactive approach.
It is our view that the policy of watch and wait was a contributing factor in the later loss of houses once the fire reached settled areas.

Aircraft were of limited use in the forested areas, due to the forest type and a lack of effective ground crews, and again, the fire front took control. 21

COMMON FACTORS

A massive amount of resources was directed to these three fires. In each case, opportunities for early containment were lost. Each blaze reached mega proportions quickly. Aerial bombing appeared to have a marginal effect only, containment lines were broken, and although resources slowed the speed of spread, it was a change in weather conditions that finally allowed fire crews to bring the blazes under control.

The attached maps show the extent and coverage of these wild fires

We do not have available to us any data as to how many people, or what equipment, were directed to these fires and when. We do note a range of media reports from this time that demonstrated an escalation in the number of personnel - 60 people (Jan 8), 100 people (Jan 15), 160 fire fighters (Jan 19), and 200 fire fighters (23 Jan). By Jan 17, 50 interstate personnel were involved, including two specialist remote-area firefighting teams. As well, by 20 January, 22 aircraft of various designations were employed. By January 28, there were reportedly 370 fire fighters and 31 aircraft facing some 72 fires. By February 5, the Mercury reported over 750 personnel remain deployed as part of the firefighting effort, with 160 from interstate and New Zealand.

It is noted that there is a recognition, in fighting such fires, for the availability and deployment of specialist wild area firefighting crews. What we did see was the high level of expertise that existed within some of the interstate and overseas bushfire crews, who had similar skills and expertise to our own personnel. Other

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21 Information on all three fires was gathered was collated from interviews on behalf of AWU with PWS Fire Crew
groups were less-skilled, and some valuable time was lost in bringing these crews up to speed, including the use of aircraft.

A common factor with all three fires was the very high fuel load present. Little had been done to reduce fuel load, and as such once fire had taken hold it was well-nigh impossible to control. In particular button grass can grow rapidly after a fire, and become a fire hazard within a short time frame.

*We cannot let this continue. Surely it is far cheaper and far safer to effectively manage fuel reduction, than to wait for a conflagration to do so.*

**GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

*Wild Fire is a constant threat, and requires a permanent attention and management.*

We need a more effective policy for fuel reduction, particularly in our Iconic World Heritage Area. And we need the people to carry out that policy. The 20 seasonal workers should be made permanent, and the 5 permanent vacancies filled.

An increased focus on eco burns is critical for that protection going forward. To reiterate, Tasmania can’t have a part time solution to a full time problem, it needs more “boots on the ground” more often and in more numbers.

Wild fire requires an immediate and rapid response, rather than a wait-and-see approach. If not tackled immediately, and we emphasise IMMEDIATELY, fire can quickly build to become a megafire. Thus the ready availability of fire fighting crews, and the transport necessary to move them to the fire front, is essential.

Fire trails and backburning are essential weapons in combating wild fire.

We have a dedicated, skilled and permanent Wilderness fire fighting force. It needs to be expanded, properly trained and adequately manned. The seasonal
workforce should be made permanent to increase resources focused on protecting our Iconic Tasmanian World Heritage Area and reserves.

It should be separate from the TFS, because its essential policy approach is different to, separate from and in some cases even at odds with that of a generalist fire service. This was recognised many years ago when the Parks crew was first established.

We need to ensure that the skillsets within our own Wilderness firefighters are maintained and reinforced. We make the point that these people are specialists, we cannot just “take them off the shelf”, they need to be trained and skilled up in this specialist activity. They are not “just” firefighters, and they are definitely not from a volunteer firefighting brigade.

The IMT structure needs to be reviewed.

The fire crew experienced a lack of willingness to make decisions, and acceptance of advice from the fire front. The IMT must have on its team people with “on the ground” experience with wilderness firefighting