

United Tasmania Group Inquiry into public and government responses to the Tasmanian bushfires of 2019

Summary

Since 2012 there have been several major bushfires in Tasmania, which have led to widespread damage including 119,200 hectares in 2012-2013 (including 44,700 hectares in the Giblin River area), 126,800 hectares across Tasmania in 2016 and the current fires that so far have consumed about 200,000 hectares in wilderness, National Park and reserve areas (2019). This inquiry focuses on wilderness and national park reserves and is based on a two-fold examination: (1) public responses to these fires as reported in the *Tasmanian Times* over the month of January 2019, and (2) an analysis of six reports into these fires over 2013-2017 and limitations in implementing the recommendations associated with these reports. This is not a report into the excellent work done, and continuing to be done, by the 700 or more firefighters involved in trying to control these fires. Quite the contrary, this report is a preliminary examination of how such efforts could be enhanced so that Tasmania can minimise future damage to the biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural heritage of these areas. This report gives expression to the widespread public concern about these fires, some of which is based on poor communication strategies by government, and what is commonly perceived as tardy and inadequate early intervention, notwithstanding access difficulties.

Method

The analysis is in two parts:

(1) Analysis of three key articles and comments on the bushfires that appeared in the *Tasmanian Times* during the month of January 2019. These articles were seen at least 1,143 times and received 114 comments over that period.

(2) Analysis of key material, recommendations and submissions from reports over the 2013-2018 period:

1. *Monitoring & Reporting System for Tasmania's National Parks and Reserves: Case study – fire management in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area*, Adrian Pyrke, Parks & Wildlife Service Manager Fire Operations, 26 Sept. 2013.
2. *2013 Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry*, Department of Premier & Cabinet, Oct. 2013
3. *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Research and Monitoring Priorities 2013-2018*, Resource Management and Conservation Division, Department of Primary Industry, Parks, Water and Environment, 2013.
4. *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project*, Tony Press, Dec. 2016.
5. *Responses to, and lessons learnt from, the January and February 2016 bushfires in remote Tasmanian wilderness*, Senate Environment & Communications References Committee, 8 Dec. 2016.
6. *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project Tasmanian Government's Response*, Tasmanian Climate Change Office, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Dec. 2017.

Summary of the comments in the *Tasmanian Times*

Some of the key issues raised in the electronic journal, the *Tasmanian Times*, over the main bushfire period of the month of January 2019 include:

- a) Inadequate responses to the initial fires, with the following suggestions for addressing this:
- That national defence forces should be trained and used in fire fighting – this occurs in most countries across the world but not in Australia. Alongside this there were two other suggestions: (1) that there should be a permanent federal fire and emergency service to complement other services, and (2) volunteer brigades, such as the Smokewalkers of the 1970s, should be established. Both these suggestions have appeared in previous inquiries.
 - Related to this was the repeated suggestion that the Tasmanian Fire Service is under-funded and under-resourced.
 - Lifting of the fire ban was premature with its rationale ‘not to inconvenience people and the agriculture industry’.
 - The State Government has held negative attitudes towards the Tasmanian World Heritage Area and has not given any indication that they regard fighting fires in such areas as a priority. In fact, the State Government has always expressed antagonism to anything remotely ‘Green’.
 - Sky cranes would be more useful than aircraft as they are more manoeuvrable and may carry much more water (10,000 litres). By comparison, turbo prop Canadair CL415 can carry 6,000 litres. Skycranes cost \$30 million to buy, or \$1.5 million to hire over 12 weeks. The Canadair CL415 costs about \$37 million to buy.
 - The ‘wait and see’ time is over – we need to move to a more proactive approach, especially given the clear impact of climate change.

There is a common perception that action was taken too late, but that is open to debate. The adequacy of the response is another matter. As many commentators stated, maximum effort should be put into extinguishing fires early.

- b) There was much discussion about the use of ‘controlled burns’ or ‘hazard reduction burns’ as a preventative measure prior to bushfire outbreaks. Comments included:
- Hazard reduction burning has less effect in mitigating bushfire spread during extreme conditions.
 - Does hazard reduction burning actually work? Where is the evidence?
 - Rainforests slow fires down, but we have created forest types that burn easily. We have created forest types that have no self-defence mechanism.
 - Fire promotes fire-loving plants (so controlled burns increase potential for further fires).
 - The suggestion that eucalypts need fire to regenerate is questionable (it only applies to certain species).
 - A key concern, which is probably not recognised widely, is that many ‘Gondwana’ or ‘Pleistocene era’ species of plants simply do not regenerate after fires (for example, King Billy and pencil pines, cushion grass, etc.).

- b) Public communication issues: There is a common perception that the State Government does not communicate on an ongoing basis about the bushfires. For example, the Premier's Department put out two brief media releases during the period of the fires, whereas with the flooding in Queensland the Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk was reported by the media almost daily. This heightens the perception that the Tasmanian Government only cares about lives and property.
- The Liberal Government (and the Labor party) were regarded as basically invisible and the Tasmanian Greens were seen as "too focussed with gender identity issues".
 - A common concern was the inadequacy of the Tasmanian Fire Service website, which is confusing to say the least – for example, what does 'watch and act' mean? The terminology on this site needs clarifying and more detail provided on what actions are actually taking place. The Parks & Wildlife Service website is much more informative.
- d) It is clear that there is widespread concern about the effects of climate change and the dramatically increased incidence of dry lightning with the subsequent increased risk of major bushfires.
- e) Health care costs: the increasing medical costs for people vulnerable to air pollution was raised – and this is especially important when the 2019 fires have continued for such a long period (eight weeks). The question was raised, 'has there been an increase in hospital admissions?'
- f) Consultation: an important point was raised that when it comes to consultations and advice it is the 'people on the ground' (such as firefighters) who are the last to be consulted.

Recommendations from key reports

The 2013 Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry made 103 recommendations, most of which concern organisational operational matters so they will not be considered here. One assumes that most of them were implemented, but there are a few very important recommendations that appear not have been fully implemented, including:

- That Tasmania Fire Service supports the relevant authorities to continue developing methodologies to forecast and simulate fire risk. (#1)
- That Tasmania Fire Service considers adopting a primary tactic of an aggressive first attack on fires. (#22)
- That bushfire agencies develop procedures for the automatic activation of aircraft to fires at pre-determined trigger points on high fire risk days. (#31)
- That the resources available to the Parks & Wildlife Service, to manage bushfire risk following the recent increase in land under its tenure, is reviewed. (#84)

Some of these same issues have been raised in inquiries following 2013.

However, the most important report to consider is the Tasmanian Government's response (December 2017) to the report by Dr. Tony Press, one year after Dr. Press had submitted his report (December 2016). The State Government undertook to 'support' 13 of the 18 recommendations and 'support in part' the other 5 recommendations.

More importantly, most of the key recommendations seemingly adopted by the Tasmanian Government in 2017 have been implemented only partially, if at all. Only a few of these recommendations will be considered here.

Recommendation 1 – Comprehensive fire management planning

Clear, well-defined objectives for fire management should be incorporated into a Fire Management Plan for the TWWHA. These objectives should identify how fire management (fire suppression, 'let go' and management fires) will be used to protect and conserve the natural and cultural heritage values in the TWWHA.

The Fire Management Plan for the TWWHA should clearly set out the circumstances in which priority will be given to protecting the Outstanding Universal Value of the TWWHA over built assets within its boundaries.¹

There are a few key problems with this recommendation. First, there is no fire management plan.

Second, under this recommendation it is stated that this management plan "integrates cultural and ecological burning". These are mutually exclusive concepts (the former is anthropocentric the second is ecocentric) so what this means is open to speculation.

Third, also under this recommendation is the statement that the plan "maps strategic and priority actions for burning". Does this mean burning parts of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA)? – if yes, where is the community input into such bureaucratic decision-making? And where is the scientific evidence to support such drastic action?

If the State Government is intent on burning parts of Southwest Tasmania then there needs to be strong scientific support and community consultation. Included in this recommendation is the comment, "experimental burning of grassland to improve biodiversity". Also mentioned in the Government report, *Research and Monitoring Priorities 2013-2018*, is the acknowledgement that, "In the absence of fire, ecological succession from moorland to rainforest, with the penultimate stage the tallest flowering plant forest in the world, is a significant process of outstanding importance"², not to mention that "there has been little research on the impacts of fire in buttongrass moorlands, particularly for fauna and geodiversity values" (pages 9-10).

Under *Recommendation 10, Operational capability* (page 28), it is stated that,

Records showing the causes of bushfires in or near the TWWHA indicate that the main risk is from lightning fires. Lightning ignitions can occur anywhere, including very remote parts of the TWWHA and a rapid suppression response to these fires is critical (Press 2016). In light of this, the Tasmanian Government acknowledges the importance of having sufficient firefighters

and firefighting resources, of the right type in the right places, to respond at the time fires start.

The Government does not seem to have engaged fully in ‘a rapid suppression response’ with respect to the first of what became a major calamity with the Gell River fire. The necessity for a ‘rapid suppression response’ is also acknowledged and accepted by the Government in recommendation 12. The Gell River fire began on 27th December 2018³ and was first detected by spotter aircraft the next day on 28 December; but by the following day, the 29th, it was reported as being contained, even though it had at that stage already joined up with other fires to create a 1,500 hectares blaze with a 27 km perimeter. A Parks & Wildlife incident controller reported on 29 December that fire activity had been reduced by eight to ten millimetres of rain and that,

The fire danger rating today is forecast to be low... Fire crews supported by air operations will be working to extinguish hot spots and secure the boundary of the fire ... (and that there were) no immediate threat to any assets or people.⁴

Just six days later, on the 4th January 2019, while the bushfires were being reported as being out-of-control authorities had downgraded warnings⁵.

The first action to try to quell the Gell River fire involved just 8 persons being deployed according to an ABC news report.⁶ A few days later, on 9 January 2019, the Government called for interstate support and had 10 aircraft and 70 personnel fighting this fire – which had already consumed 20,500 hectares.⁷

As at 12 noon 15 February the Gell River fire had burnt 33,000 hectares. Another fire, the Moores Valley fire (west of Strathgordon) had no attention and has burnt 45,000 hectares. This area is not within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area so it would not qualify for any Federal Government assistance. However, it is part of the Southwest Conservation Area. The two other major fires have been in the Central Highlands (55,000 hectares) and the area west and south of Huonville (64,000 hectares).

What has been perceived as an inadequate rapid response to the 2019 fires by many commentators in the *Tasmanian Times* was also seen as an issue in the Senate Inquiry (pages 42-44) with respect to the 2016 fires.

Under *Recommendation 11, Use of volunteers*, it is stated that:

The Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with other Tasmanian fire agencies, should review the future potential for the use of volunteers in supporting fire management activities, including the potential to use trained remote area volunteer fire crews.

The recommendation goes on to say that this would require “developing and maintaining the required fitness levels of personnel, and providing the necessary personnel training and equipment”. This recommendation also appears in the AFAC operational review (2016)⁸ and in the Senate Inquiry (pages 35-36).

Under *Recommendation 13, Aerial fire suppression*, where “water bombing from large helicopters” was suggested in Dr. Tony Press’ report, the Government has indicated

hesitancy, even though it says it accepts the recommendation, because “significant infrastructure would be required” (page 32).

Under *Recommendation 14, Research on fire suppression chemicals*, the Government acknowledges that the “data on the effectiveness and impacts of the use of these chemicals in the region (TWWHA) has not yet been collated or analysed” – yet the Government is already using such chemicals in the TWWHA!

Under *Recommendation 16, Improved public information and communications*, the Government acknowledges and supports “enhancing public information communication” (page 37). This recommendation was also made in the APAC review and the Senate Inquiry – but clearly there has been a failure to follow this through, as indicated by the number of complaints about this issue in the analysis of articles and comments appearing in the *Tasmanian Times*, as indicated earlier in this report.

Was fighting these fires adequately resourced? In the Senate Inquiry concerning the 2016 fires the Tasmanian Government submitted that:

... more than 5,600 Tasmanian volunteer and career fire fighters, over 1,000 interstate and international firefighters, and as many as 40 aircraft were deployed (page 35).

- Whereas only 755 firefighters were deployed in the current 2019 fires (ABC News, 6 Feb. 2019). Why is there such a large difference? Is the State Government treating the 2019 less seriously than the 2016 fires - even though the present fires have burnt 200,000 hectares as compared with 126,800 hectares in 2016?

As noted earlier, as with the 2016 fires, this time the response to the initial fires may not have been tardy but certainly inadequate in terms of outcomes. In a submission to the Senate Inquiry, Friends of the Earth suggested that it might be necessary to pre-emptively request interstate assistance to protect sensitive vegetation (page 45). This is a very good suggestion.

While dry lightning strikes have been blamed for the enormous destruction in the TWWHA it is important to note that the number of lightning strikes does not correlate with the areas subsequently burnt (for example, 45,000 strikes created minimum damage in 2009-10 and conversely in 2012-13).¹⁰

Concluding comments

1. UTG supports the call by Senator Nick McKim, who chaired the 2016 Senate Inquiry, for a public, open inquiry (‘summit’) into the 2019 fires in order to “plan the best way to respond to wilderness bushfires in the future”. We also endorse his objective for this summit to “allow issues to be worked through constructively and collaboratively with the aim of agreeing on outcomes that would allow remote wilderness fires to be hit hard and hit early, which is the best way to minimise damage.”
2. UTG suggests that such an inquiry should also examine the incomplete implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries and the reasons for this.

3. UTG calls for the establishment of bushwalker-cum-firefighter brigades, along the lines of the Smokewalkers of the 1970s, as suggested in previous inquiries.
4. UTG calls for the Parks & Wildlife Service, as a matter of priority, to develop a scientifically-based policy on the use of fire in the TWWHA which recognises the need to protect the range of values in the TWWHA, including highly fire sensitive communities and also to allow for on-going natural evolution in significant areas of the TWWHA. Such a policy might be for no use of fire at all, or no widespread use of fire, to allow for natural ecological evolution as the primary management aim.
5. UTG calls for all 'hazard reduction burning' within wilderness, National Park and Conservation Areas to be suspended until the consequences of such activities have been scientifically evaluated.
6. UTG calls for better communication strategies to be put in place immediately in order to address public concerns about management of major bushfires in Tasmania.

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Secretary, UTG
14 February 2019



¹ *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project Tasmanian Government's Response*, Tasmanian Climate Change Office, Department of Premier and Cabinet, page 10, December 2017.

² *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Research and Monitoring Priorities 2013-2018*, Resource Management and Conservation Division, Department of Primary Industry, Parks, Water and Environment, page 6, 2013.

³ There were also lightning strikes on the 16th December, but it is 'believed' that these were not related to the Gell River fire (Bureau of Meteorology personal communication, 7 February 2019).

⁴ <https://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/5829999/update-wilderness-bushfires-merge-into-1500-hectare-blaze/>. The name of the incident controller mentioned has been withheld from this report.

⁵ <https://tendaily.com.au/news/australia/a190104qwo/homes-at-risk-in-huge-tasmanian-bushfires-20190104>

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-06/hold-tas-sun-am-questions-over-remote-fire-fighting-resources-in/10687142>

⁷ <https://www.news.com.au/national/tasmania/interstate-resources-called-in-to-assist-with-gell-river-fire-as-very-high-fire-danger-declared/news-story/e921b00ba619829036473ac6f66d3011>

⁸ AFAC (2016) *AFAC Independent Operational Review – A review of the management of the Tasmanian fires of January 2016*. Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council, Melbourne, Victoria. 2016. http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/userfiles/tym/file/misc/1604_tasfirereport_final1.pdf

⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-05/tasmanian-fire-crews-urged-to-take-care-sixth-week/10778966>

¹⁰ *Monitoring & Reporting System for Tasmania's National Parks and Reserves: Case study – fire management in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area*, Adrian Pyrke, Parks & Wildlife Service Manager Fire Operations, Figure 2, 26 Sept. 2013