

TASMAN FIRES 2013 – REPORTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

Compiled by a Tas Times reporter

The bushfires in early January 2013 affected many people with the Tasman peninsula particularly severely affected because the peninsula became totally isolated from the rest of Tasmania as the road, power and many communications services were cut and no action was taken to provide a regular water borne service for residents and others. The peninsula residents were thus isolated for about 9 days between Jan 3 -12 2013 while some services such as fixed line phones still not working after Jan 17.

Map showing area of fires and the Tasman Peninsula {on right}



The following narrative attempts to give voice to Tasman residents who experienced various unnecessary difficulties during, and immediately after, the fires.

Community and business worked to meet the evident needs

During the period, many stories were presented on TV, radio and in the papers about the massive levels of help provided by individuals, companies and groups. From a raft of volunteers and professionals fighting fires, installing generators, helping people to a few ferries loaned by private operators in the early days, to massive efforts by local fishermen and boat owners to ferry supplies and people, to donors providing food for people and livestock, plus a whole range of other services provided by people who saw and need and went out of their way to supply it.

It was a brilliant effort by police, fire services, SES plus a whole range of community members who took the initiative and did what obviously needed to be done.

Centrelink processed payments to affected residents quickly and efficiently, crews from power and phone companies and multiple sub-contractors, did heroic work to re-establish services while certain insurance companies opened local tent based offices in the worst affected areas.

Overall it was a brilliant effort by communities, helpful individuals and businesses to help alleviate the worst of the suffering experienced by those involved in the emergency.

What we didn't see in the media (or on the ground) was how the State government had moved to help residents and others to reduce the impacts of the emergency, the reason is that there were no such efforts.. Indeed by defining telecommunications as non-essential, the federal government has left our telecommunications systems exposed with inadequate back ups and an overall system that isn't robust enough to take Australia into the 21st century. How our economy would work without telecommunications has never been explained and weaknesses in t'comms during an emergency can create profound problems.

Apart from PR, State government was notable by its absence

Politicians toured with TV cameras, pressed flesh and offered sympathies but they didn't send logistics and communication experts, nor organise regular ferries to help residents to get supplies, nor did they implement any useful emergency telephone contacts for isolated residents who needed information. They didn't provide needed food, or help for farmers whose stock were starving, neither did they assure that the various emergency plans that they claimed to have¹, were actually implemented, nor that information was integrated, factual and distributed to everyone who needed it. They hadn't even provided emergency responders with adequate maps and technologies to co-ordinate and respond most effectively to the disparate fires spreading around the peninsula.

Relief at last? Sent in the first few days to the fire ravaged areas in the Tasman peninsula, not logistics and health professionals, not generators, not hand cranked radios but politicians - Dick Adams, Lara Giddings, Julia Gillard etc

Lara Giddings was 'talking with' a family who had been burned out in Dunalley. When they stated that they believed that the fires wouldn't have been as serious if more frequent fuel reductions had been carried out by government and its various instruments the Premier replied to the effect that fuel reduction wouldn't have made any difference, the damage was the result of the weather. Isn't it great to know that the Premier has that expertise?

What's happening? At one Emergency Services Command HQ
Visitor: "Why aren't there any maps anywhere?"
Operator "The Police took it"
Visitor: "What are you using?"
Is shown a traced outline (unlabelled) of Peninsula on piece of white paper

Of course, the police took the map because they didn't have one either!

How were briefings carried out? How were geographic issues understood? Only emergency services pressed by major budget cuts could have no maps of the areas that they are supposed to work in. And

only an organisation where the members were constantly under threat of management repercussions would stay silent about such a lack of critical tools. Indeed many local emergency responders cannot make local decisions, they have to refer decisions to bureaucrats in Hobart – more delays and morale busting lack of power for those doing the actual work.

In fact, it appeared to many in the community that the State government was more of an impediment, a mountain for emergency service personnel to climb, rather than an active participant in helping to deal with severe threats to the community.

The result was a schemozzle of co-ordination and communication.

Some comments and some typical stories

The two main emergency contact numbers were often slow or unavailable, 000 created frustrating delays as overseas operators utterly unfamiliar with local geography and English struggled with descriptions and spelling while frustrated residents struggled to get calls through on mobile phones that were running out of charge and money. Others (e.g. local Council) simply did not have the requisite information and were unable to help despite the best efforts of the few secretaries and receptionists there. The most common statement from operators was “I’m sorry I can’t help you”.

Residents planning to ‘stay and defend’ relied on fire categorisation to finalise their plans (stay or leave) but many found out that emergency personnel (police, Parks & Rec, FT etc) did not know what category of fire faced them at any given time. Lack of such critical information leaves residents to carry all of the risk. Where was the co-ordinated information that people could trust? Who was supposed to have provided that service...the Council?

The power provider Aurora announced that 700 power poles were downed by fires. The lack of power meant no water, refrigeration, communication, cooking, showers, toilet flushing etc for many people.

Integrated information After a week stuck on the peninsula, one couple found out that police had organised a convoy to escort people out leaving at 9a.m from a local centre. They were first to arrive at 8:50 and were told by police at the checkpoint, that they couldn't leave the peninsula as the road was closed.

Couple: "But there's a convoy leaving here in 10 minutes"

Police: "Is there?" Goes to check on the radio..."Oh yes, so there is..."

At the time of writing (17 Jan) the community is still offering most of the services needed by residents such as food, stock feed, water, supplies, money and other support. The State government has formed a recovery committee and demonstrated their lack of interest in local businesses by giving the clean-up work to a Burnie based company leaving local heavy equipment operators to compete for any sub-contracting work.

Telecommunications were a mess, with mobile phone towers out due to power losses, optic fibre cables melting and landlines not working due to fires affecting exchanges and cables. Promoted web sites such as the Fire Service were unavailable as most residents had no power, and many such sites crashed anyway as there was an 'unplanned' load on them. After 8 days without power [generators were flown in](#) from Queensland but were still unavailable on 13 Jan in many areas.

Evacuation and communications Firefighters had just finished evacuating one area ahead of a huge fire front and were setting up to contain the fire as best they could when the evacuees started to trickle back into the danger zone. When

the fires asked why they hadn't stayed away as instructed the residents replied..."We heard on the ABC radio that it was safe to return..."

Various political visits were made while important messages that could be construed as critical were held up by staff afraid to expose themselves to management action. The entire public sector and much of the private sector professed fear of repercussions from politicians and bureaucrats and were unwilling to speak out even within their own organisations.

TV news reports, in this order and in the same bulletin...

- 1) The Tasman Peninsula is now cut off by fires, roads may not open for weeks
- 2) There is no power to the Tasman peninsula
- 3) Anyone needing information should log onto the TFS or Police websites

Query. How do we access the websites when we have no power?

If government used the common military concept of [C4I](#) it would focus on command, control, communications, co-ordination and intelligence. In the case of Tasman fires, all of these functions were compromised by lack of communications capability, lack of power, lack of trained personnel, lack of priority and lack of any coherent strategy by the State government. Command also failed to co-ordinate available information sources (e.g. radio) to be consistent with information available on the ground.

The local Council adverted in the latest [Peninsula Gazette](#) that "*Council has a current Municipal Emergency Management Plan which provides a consistent state-wide framework for communication and co-ordination between the various state emergency agencies and key organisations in the area i.e. PAHSMA, THCS etc. A key component of the Plan is recovery ...*".

While the Council carried out some functions their phone lines were only manned 9-5 (unfortunately not hours recognised by the fires), their staff did not receive any emergency management training. neither were they provided with the tools or information to cope with the emergency - although it was clearly possible for helicopters to fly politicians around. From a residents point-of-view, there was no information available, and any that did exist was frequently contradicted by another information source.

Emergency evacuation centres On TV news I see a family I know at an evac centre. To contact them, I call Sorell Police - no answer (it's 5:15pm).

I then call the Hobart Police HQ - no answer (it's still after 5:00 pm!). I call the Police Emergency line (131444) and am told that its a Red Cross function. I call the Red Cross and tell them what I'm trying to do. The operator says "Yes, we keep everyone's name and contact numbers in our system. We can't help you now however because our computer isn't working"

A couple of days later, when the Red Cross computer centre was working, I found that the people I was trying to contact were recorded as being at Nubeena. I went to that centre where I was told "Yes we know who arrived here, but we have no system to record who has left or when, so we really don't know where those people are"

Some potential lessons from the emergency

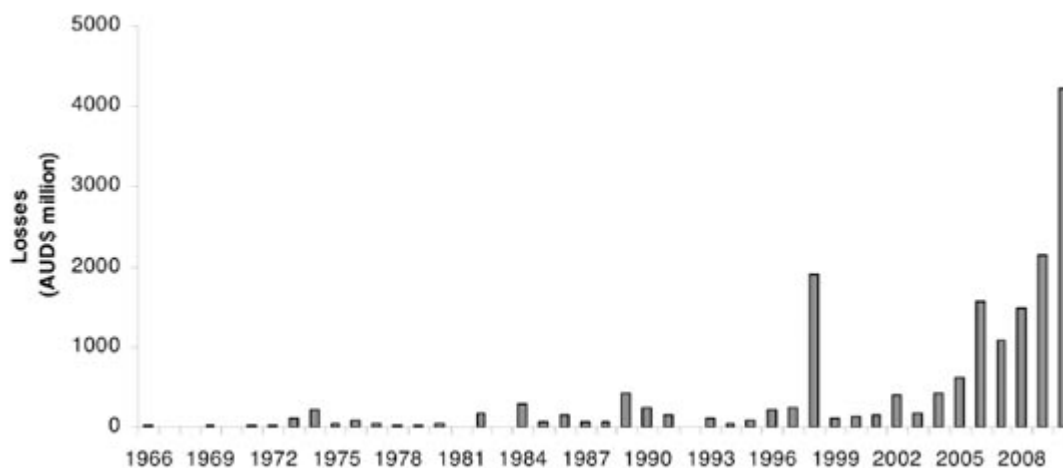
Response times are being slowed down by call centres based overseas (e.g. 000) where operators have no local knowledge and patchy English skills and take extra time to try to understand caller's requirements. It can take a long time to explain to someone overseas with often patchy English skills, where an emergency is and where the caller is, what the risks are and so on. Local operators do not have those problems so responses can be a lot quicker.

Other delays are caused because local emergency responders have to get many of their emergency actions approved by bureaucrats in Hobart before they are allowed to act. Lack of necessary resources, delays in information and dubious telecommunications systems all contribute to increasing severity of any emergency.

Here's how [New Matilda](#) sees it..." *Another cause for concern is the state of our emergency services, nationally. Extreme weather and natural disaster preparedness inherently involves public sector emergency services, such as fire-fighters, ambulance, police and SES. Most of these services are delivered by the states. That's a problem, because the states have long term financial problems caused by their eroding tax base, particularly the slowly growing GST."*

And... *"Australia's emergency response effort is still heavily reliant on volunteer labour. But volunteers fit enough to fight bushfires or rescue flood victims will become more difficult to find as our society ages. Nor have our emergency services solved all their information and communication issues. During Black Saturday, breakdowns in internal communications in the Victorian fire control system meant that crucial warnings to residents in Marysville and Kinglake never went out."*

Insurance losses due to extreme weather events over last 40 years. Source: Insurance Council of Australia



A look at the graph of costs to insurers of extreme weather events indicates that costs are increasing exponentially and are being incurred far more frequently. Clearly that trend is not sustainable.

It was, and still is, clear that the community largely helped itself. Australians cannot rely upon, nor need, the current poor service from our 3 tiers of overpriced government. When the community really needs help, it has to help itself (which works)...because the 3 tiers of government appear far too ;interested in ‘world stages’, ‘balanced budgets’ and the like to actually provide assistance to millions of Australian taxpayers. Indeed they like to represent themselves as ‘cash strapped’ when in fact they are spending large amounts of money on things that Australians simply don’t need (wars, ponderous bureaucracies, opulent benefits, high salaries, favours for ailing businesses, 3 levels of government when 2 would suffice, distorting the free market etc).

The federal government clearly needs to define telecommunications as an essential service (how could they govern without them? How could the economy operate?) Some say that the government has an arrangement with Telstra not to define telecommunications as essential because it would cost Telstra too much to make their services more robust and reliable.

The level of government waste in Australia is alarming and cannot continue, particularly when governments cannot be relied upon to help Australians when they need it. Now that we can Google information in moments and inform ourselves about almost anything, and we can vote by mobile phone (e.g. GetUp) why do we need self-promoting ‘representatives’ who cannot be relied upon, even in an emergency?

Researcher at the University of Melbourne, Allan Patience recently asked in [The Age](#) ...

“Are state governments, with their bureaucracies of declining quality and capacity, their armies of consultants and their legions of spin doctors really giving us value for our money? Can we really afford them?

More importantly, do we really need them?”

Our State government is helping us by providing a clear answer that question and it is a resounding ‘NO!’

Without them we’d have the resources to buy maps for our emergency services, assure that staff are properly trained to deal with emergencies, and provide fire shelters and adequate information to residents threatened by fire.

In fact that may be the only way to really deal with the high cost future implied by the Insurance Council’s graphic.

¹ A culture of bullying has long been associated with the highest levels of leadership in Tasmania (e.g. [The Monthly article by Flanagan](#)) resulting in a culture of fear throughout the public sector and others reliant upon government (e.g. NGOs).