

Andrew Darby,

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Mr Mal Cronstedt, AFSM,
Chair,
Independent Review into 2018-19 Tasmanian Bushfires
AFAC.Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au.

Submission

Dear Mr Cronstedt and Review Panel Members,

I offer a personal submission to aid your deliberations on lessons to be learned from these fires, which represent a watershed moment in fire occurrence and management for Tasmania.

I have a 40 year background as a news reporter who has covered many bushfires in Victoria and Tasmania, and has reported many battles over the protection of Tasmania's Wilderness World Heritage Area for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. I bring to my submission observations drawn from both public information, and from off-the-record sources.

The WHA is the primary focus of my submission. In my opinion, no danger to the WHA in the past has been greater than the danger its globally unique values face now from climate change-induced bushfire.

Here is a short reminder of just how unique the WHA is. It's a direct quote from the Tasmanian Parks website. "The Tasmanian Wilderness WHA is one of only 21 World Heritage properties that satisfy all natural criteria for selection and one of only 38 that satisfies both natural and cultural criteria. At the time of listing, the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area satisfied seven of a possible ten criteria - more than any other World Heritage Site. To date, only one other World Heritage Site, Mt Taishan in China, listed in 1987 has satisfied as many criteria for inclusion on the World Heritage List (6 cultural and one natural)."

In the years leading up to these fires, you will be aware that a number of warnings were issued by independent scientists of the increasing frequency of dry-lightning thunderstorms in Tasmania and the WHA as part of rapid climate change. Of particular importance is the article by Jenny Styger et. al., in the journal *Fire*, 'Changes in Lightning Fire Incidence in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, 1980-2016' published on 19 October 2018.

This study concludes: "Thus, it appears that an increase in the proportion of

lightning strikes that occur in dry conditions has increased ignition efficiency. These changes have important implications for the management of the TWWHA's values, as higher projected fuel loads and drier climates could result in a further increase in the number of fires associated with lightning."

It's uncanny, but very sobering, that this prediction was borne out in vast tracts of the WHA within months of the publication of this article.

Response to the Gell River fire.

The need for development of a very strong Tasmania Fire Service capability for Initial Attack/Rapid Attack response to dry-lightning strike fires is urgent and vital. The cascading, exponentially greater costs of failure to stamp out these fires at an early, manageable stage, are starkly illustrated in the case of Gell River.

When first sighted by aerial reconnaissance the day after ignition, the Gell River fire was at around 12 ha. I have seen an image of it at that point. It was burning largely in buttongrass moorland and fringing low forest. It was easily accessible by either helicopter insertion of firefighters, or aerial water-bombing, or both. However the response was delayed after initial report, to a point where the inserted crew had an impossible task.

In her comment on this at the UTas: 'Tasmania burning: Lessons from the global bushfire crisis symposium', the TFS Community Fire Safety Division director, Sandra Whyte, said: "we did have rapid weight of suppression on these fires...the Gell River fire we had crews on the ground within 24 hours".

In my submission, this is old thinking. Would 24 hours be OK if it was your property? Of course not. This IS a property. It's global property, and its custodians must develop the means to safeguard the WHA.

It's a matter of history that months later, the Gell River fire had burned 35,000 ha. and had taken with it some Gondwanan flora of key world heritage value. I was very disturbed by the continued minimization of most of the damage in official communication of this fire's effects. The fact that it burned mainly across buttongrass moorland does not mean that it's OK.

Yes, this moorland may be better at recovery from one fire than a Gondwanan Pencil Pine that won't ever come back. But fire in buttongrass moorland is bad for two reasons. Firstly it's also peat land, where fire can sit for weeks before emerging to reignite a conflagration. Secondly that land, repeatedly burned, can lose its nutritional value to plants. It erodes under high rainfall to bare gravels. You can see this easily even in old walking tracks of the WHA, where repeat footfalls have killed the flora, leaving the ground to erode away into permanent scars.

Gell River Fire Management

The management of this fire was officially at first in the hands off PWS. It did

not invite TFS to take over management for several days, until it was clearly beyond PWS's management ability.

The stripping of PWS resources, including fire-fighting capacity, by successive state governments is one issue to be addressed, though probably not by this review. What this review may consider is whether the PWS, so stripped, was able actually to administer the fire-fighting capacity. Or did it, under financial pressure, pull its first punch at Gell River? I understand that PWS was of the initial view that this fire would pull itself up in wet country.

Of great importance is the need to streamline bushfire management on all government-controlled lands in the hands of the TFS from first report.

If legislative change is needed, then so be it. There must be one agency that takes immediate charge and responsibility. Under climate change-caused bushfires, there is no time for handshakes and handovers of duplicated tasks. Decision-making speed and application of resources is vital to saving money as well as life and property.

There may also need to be a reassessment of the TFS legislative mandate. Yes, it is bound to firstly protect life and property, and of course that makes sense. But "property" may be need to be broadened to include specially important natural values.

The other lesson learned from the lack of a rapid response to Gell River was the cascading effect on the overall fire-fighting effort. After more than two weeks fighting this fire with limited effect, the January 15 lightning strikes occurred. There was much for the TFS to triage at this time, but it was clear early on that the Riveaux Road fire was one of the more dangerous. Were aerial resources tied up at Gell River when they were needed at Riveaux Road?

Subsequent to that, the enormous cost in volunteer time and aerial effort of the Gell River fire obviously must have taken resources away from other fire fronts.

To Tasmania's shame, some of the other larger fires in the WHA never saw a firefighter. Even now, a final tally of their damage has not been made public.

Communication on bushfires.

This leads to my final points. In order to understand clearly the scale of the bushfire challenge ahead, the public must be kept fully informed of its full current dangers, and all costs, financial and otherwise.

The public struggle with the TFS website, which has not had a full overhaul in over a decade. I'm used to navigating it and I can usually pull out relevant information about hour-to-hour developments if I look somewhere down the bottom of a listing. But in internet terms, these listing are archaic. People,

particularly when under pressure, find it a frustrating website to navigate. And they want a dedicated app. One that will give them immediate answers.

I'll give you a recent example of this. My neighbours looked out their window one night recently to see a large fire on the next door property's land, and fire trucks with lights flashing. My neighbours have long decided they are in no position to defend their house, so immediately gathered their bushfire evacuation boxes and turned their vehicles to leave. After speaking to them I looked on the TFS website and eventually navigated to the "approved permits" section, where I found that the burn was approved, and so was able to partly reassure these frightened neighbours. The land owner where the burn was going does not communicate with neighbours, so my friends were left to panic.

We all must understand the nuances of fire's growing place in our landscape, and the TFS internet presence is the best first tool to do that.

Local ABC is never as fast at communicating developments. It also has the capacity to cause rising anxiety, and turn people off, by the constant repetition of often very generalised messages.

Lastly, I think that timely independent reporting of overall damage from bushfires is vital. The public needs to understand exactly what has happened. Political pressure was great to minimize or spin the damage reports of what happened in the WHA. The knee-jerk protection by political leaders against bad publicity will inevitably lead to what it is trying to prevent – disappointed tourists. Tasmanians, if they are to take proper ownership of the fate of the WHA as custodians, also deserve to have this information.

Think of the role as like that of an independent government chief health officer, who must inform the public of a disease outbreak. Communicating the new normal bushfire costs is that important.

Thank you for your attention. I am available to talk further either in person or by phone about this submission if it would be of assistance.

With best wishes for your deliberations,

Andrew Darby