

Review into Tasmanian Bushfires during summer of 2018/2019

Submission by:

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Dear Review Panel

Firstly, and foremost, I am disappointed that the Liberal Party Premier of our State Will Hodgman has chosen to have only a 'review' of the fires in Tasmania during 2018/2019 rather than a formal inquiry that rigorously examines why the fires became so large and uncontrollable. This to me is a clear indication he is not genuinely interested in improving fire response by the various agencies, only to placate those who have been so disappointed with his governments performance during this past summers bush fires.

A review seems completely inappropriate when so much of Tasmania has been burnt in the last few months. Not only is an inquiry justified for the large-scale event that has occurred but it is needed to properly determine what went wrong.

I have observed in person the effect the fires have had along Gordon River Rd, particularly at the Needles, along Scotts Peak Rd near Mt Anne and in the Florentine Valley. The extent of the area burnt is shocking, yet much larger areas of Tasmania have been burnt than these ones, that I have not seen.

The large loss of animal and other life as well as the threatened flora lost deserves more than a 'review'. Would Will like a 'review' if his house burnt down or if he lost members of his family or his own life, such as the animals have had to endure (most likely through no fault of their own since we are the ones driving climate change)?

Regarding the Review terms of reference stated, they seem to be rather ad-hoc with no clear structure from start to finish – the terms seem like 9 random points the Review team want to '*consider*' that were drawn up on the back of an envelope, rather than a complete, methodical, and rigorous investigation of all the problems that may have contributed to the fires becoming so large, including for example recommendations not implemented from past fire inquiries.

Perhaps point 8 may be an attempt to address the lack of detailed criteria:

8. Any other matter that the Review team identifies in the course of its activities as warranting discussion.

This review term of reference does not seem an adequate approach to investigate all other aspects of such a major event though as it is random and means important matters may not be examined if they are not raised.

Given the incompleteness of the Terms of Reference, I will raise some additional questions that I feel are important and the review panel should consider to properly address what has happened, as well as commenting on the stated Review Terms of Reference. No doubt there are aspects I have not thought of that other submissions will raise and hopefully this, combined with the panel's own inquiring minds will result in a thorough and near complete examination of what went wrong, who should be held accountable, and what should be done in future.

Comments on stated Terms of reference:

Terms of Reference for Independent Review into 2018-19 bushfires:

1. The causes, chronology and response of the 2018-19 bushfires in Tasmania on and following 28 December 2018.

The causes are probably straight forward in the sense that it had been a very dry summer and dry lightning strikes started most (if not all) of the fires. The chronology is, however, essential to examine thoroughly as this forms the time reference for the response times of the various agencies.

From the chronology it should be a straight forward matter to determine the response and determine what was lacking here. If there are found to be timely responses of adequate resources lacking, those agencies that were responsible for this need to be asked why that occurred and held accountable for this.

The responses – not just timely, but with adequate resourcing - by the various agencies is clearly a critical point of the review and so should be thoroughly examined. The general feeling amongst people (including myself) is that the response was late and/or inadequately resourced for at least the Gell River, the Riveaux Rd, and the Mt Anne fires. Some other fires apparently were not resourced at all.

2. The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

How would the panel like to measure 'effectiveness'? Community messaging was clearly much lacking – all that was announced is a message every

15mins saying there is a fire emergency in certain areas and to leave if it is safe to do so or stay and defend if it was too late to leave.

What useful information does this message give for people to make decisions? For people to make an informed decision as to what to do 3 pieces of information are required:

1. How far away is the fire?

This would give people some sense of how much time they have.

2. What direction is the fire moving in?

This would give people a sense of how likely they are to be in the path of the fire.

3. What is the average speed of the fire?

Together with 1., this would give people a sense of how much time they have and the intensity of the fire – e.g. a slow-moving fire is less intense and perhaps more predictable than a fast moving one.

A fourth piece of information – whether there is any forecast change in wind direction is another useful piece of information.

None of this information was given, only the mindless, 15min announcements (that went on for weeks and so people tired of them) saying stay or leave with no reason given. People do not need to be told whether to stay or leave, they need the 3 pieces of information and can then decide for themselves – as they would anyway with the announcements given.

3. The timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy, including accommodating the priorities of life, property, environmental and cultural values, and timber production and forest asset values by Tasmanian fire agencies.

Together with Term of Reference 1, this is obviously the major aspect that needs proper investigation – as it seems that many people believe the response time was long and then with inadequate resources, allowing some fires to become large and uncontrollable.

The question of what to prioritise to protect is also important here, as past responses have clearly shown an unwillingness of agencies to adequately resource fire fighting in places where people do not live/ have property.

During the 2016 fires it was demonstrated that the fire agencies (TFS, Parks, etc) had little interest in fighting the Central Plateau/ Walls of Jerusalem National Park fire, despite this fire destroying significant numbers of rare ancient alpine plants that do not recover from fire - such as the Pencil Pines.

Clearly a major problem (perhaps even the biggest) is that our Premier Will Hodgman and his Government do not have an appreciation/understanding or

interest of the value of Tasmania's rare and threatened flora and fauna, let alone an interest in the conservation of those species. Given this, it is understandable why fires originating in wilderness areas become large and uncontrollable. Perhaps the panel needs to make some recommendations to enlighten our Premier/ Minister for Parks, Tourism, and Heritage?

See Catalyst video (link at end) referencing the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Draft Management Plan 2015 at 14mins 40secs where the words 'rapid response' for wildfire management were removed from the 1999 Management Plan.

4. The impact and effectiveness of fuel management programs in the fire affected areas on the management and containment of the fires.

I suspect the effectiveness of fuel management programs in the fire areas had little, if any, effect on the fire behaviour as fuels were very dry at the time and the major fires all started in areas where there probably was no fuel management.

Even if there had been prior fuel management programs in those areas where the fires were, I think the conditions for a fire starting would not have been reduced much. It is difficult to keep fires under control when very dry conditions exist if adequate resources are not allocated quickly.

5. The effectiveness of state, regional and local command, control and co-ordination arrangements, to include agency interoperability and the co-ordination of emergency management activities with government and non-government organisations.

This is a matter for the panel to determine as I am not aware of how effectively the various agencies worked together.

6. The effectiveness of the arrangements in place for requesting and managing interstate and international assistance and the significance of interstate and international assistance in managing the fires.

Again, this is a matter for the panel to decide, it seems however that interstate resources were available but not utilized for several weeks after the fires started, at which time the fires were too large to control.

In the end, the fires abated due to rain events. Any resourcing, whether intra or interstate, needs to be deployed in a timely way when very dry conditions exist. Obviously, if dry conditions exist and fires seem likely, agencies in Tasmania should be in contact (before any fires start) with mainland agencies to determine what resources are available at short notice if required.

7. The use and effectiveness of aviation firefighting resources, in particular, the suitability of aircraft types for the protection of environmental values, forest assets and the rural/urban interface in Tasmania.

This is a matter for the panel to determine via feedback from the various agencies that have the expertise to suitably inform the panel. Various aircraft types were used during the 2018/2019 fires yet the large fires still kept burning until rain arrived. Perhaps not enough were used?

8. Any other matter that the Review team identifies in the course of its activities as warranting discussion.

Further considerations that I believe the review team should investigate:

- Is the use of modern technology such as satellite/ drones/ thermal imaging from helicopters, etc appropriate to detect fires early? How effective are current information systems in the early detection of fires? What about early response effectiveness? Were adequate resources deployed in a timely way (that night the dry lightning occurred) to detect any new fires? If not why not?
- Are there adequate resources in Tasmania for fire fighting? If there are why did the fires become so large? What more resources are required? If Tasmania does not have adequate resources for large fire fighting, are adequate resources available from interstate at short notice?
- The many fires all started off small (obviously) and some became very large. It is evident to me and others that the initial response by the TFS/PWS was not adequate to stop the fires becoming large. It is clear adequate resources were not deployed early.

The TFS will argue that they could not respond to the ‘thousands’ of lightning strikes that occurred on some days/nights recently. I would argue that they probably did not respond to any of them in a timely way, only addressing the situation once the fires became too large. Despite the thousands of lightning strikes, there were only about half a dozen large fires. What was required was determination within an hour or so those fires that needed urgent attention, either due to their location or burn rate. Then adequate resources should have been deployed to those priority fires to extinguish them. I believe the TFS/PWS clearly failed to determine early those fires that were a priority to allocate resources to.

I live in the town of Maydena which was threatened by the Gell River fire for over a month. Initially when the Gell River fire started I noticed very little aircraft activity over Maydena (the helicopters have consistently flown over the town to resource the Gell River fire). It was only weeks after the fire started that I observed significant aircraft resources flying over Maydena. Clearly there was an operational decision by TFS/PWS not to allocate adequate resources early on (Dec 28th 2018) for this fire.

- How effective were other agencies such as the BOM in the prediction of fire risks? E.g. dry lightning strikes that started the fires- were these forecast adequately and did fire agencies act on these forecasts given the dry conditions?
- How did weather conditions affect controlling the fires? Whilst there were some windy days in Tasmania during the fire period there were no wildfire/ firestorm conditions this summer, yet over 200 000ha of land has been burnt. The major problem seemed to be the dry fuel conditions combined with lightning strikes – so this is the challenge for fire agencies to focus on. The response needs to be planned to be that night if the fire starts during the night. Dry lightning was forecast by the BOM this summer days ahead of when it occurred. What plans did the TFS have to check on the effect of these lightning strikes? Was satellite monitoring, drones, or aircraft deployed? Why not?
- Did fire agency managers examine data from the BOM such as soil dryness and rainfall in the last 30 days to determine fire likelihood in the various areas of Tasmania? If not why not?

The fuel load was known to be very dry before the fires started due to the lack of rain. It was **entirely predictable** and probably inevitable that fires would be a problem for Tasmania this summer back in December. What planning did the TFS undertake in terms of response and resources to address this threat during the early part of December 2018?

It is clear the TFS has no plan to deal with fires, other than to simply react to them when they occur.

- What preparations were made to protect threatened flora that is fire intolerant such as Pencil pines, Huon pines etc from being burnt? Was fire fighting in Pencil pine stands given the highest priority? If not why not? Were Pencil pines seen by fire agencies as 'just another plant' like eucalypt trees for example?
- How effective were other agencies such as Tas Police who applied 'mindless blockage' to residents wanting to access their properties? Was this an appropriate way to control the movements of people? Was it appropriate and necessary to close roads for months?
- Accountability of agencies and managers with regard to poor decision making- is anyone being held accountable for what has happened and if not why not? Did poor decisions by managers and/ or controllers in the early stages of the fires contribute to any of the fires becoming larger to the point where fighting the fires became a challenge of containment and control rather than a planned and effective response?

- What role did climate change (a dry summer) have in the Tasmanian fire season? Was a dry summer forecast by the BOM (I believe it was) and if so, what preparations did the various agencies in Tasmania responsible for fire management make?
- What role has the conversion of large tracts of Tasmania's cool temperate rainforest areas into highly flammable eucalypt plantations had on land flammability in places such as the Florentine and Huon Valleys which both had large uncontrolled fires (Gell River and Riveaux Rd fires)?
- Do the relevant agencies have a plan and strategy to stop fires becoming large before they occur? What and where is this plan?
- Were recommendations from previous fire inquiries (e.g. 2016 Inquiry) implemented by fire agencies and if not why not?

References:

- ABC TV Catalyst science show April 5th 2016: Effect of 2016 fires on threatened flora.
<http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/4437596.htm>
- 2016 fire inquiry: Responses to, and lessons learnt from, the January and February 2016 bushfires in remote Tasmanian wilderness:
<file:///C:/Users/Client/AppData/Local/Temp/report-2.pdf>
- Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Draft Management Plan 2015:
[https://dpiwwe.tas.gov.au/conservation/tasmanian-wilderness-world-heritage-area-\(twwha\)/twwha-management-plan](https://dpiwwe.tas.gov.au/conservation/tasmanian-wilderness-world-heritage-area-(twwha)/twwha-management-plan)

9. The Review team will provide a means for members of the public and other interested parties to make submissions to the Review and will have regard to any submissions received in compiling its report.

The panel should have ample information available to make informed decisions and recommendations to the State and Federal Governments. Whether those Governments are genuinely interested in these recommendations is another matter.