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## INTRODUCTION

This is a written submission based on personal experiences and feedback obtained from personnel involved in the Great Barren Tier Bush Fire. The Tas Fire Service has had an extreme fire season and all that attended these fires, gave great commitment and sacrifice to control the blaze. Within this document are both problems that have been identified that we feel are worth bringing to attention and potential solutions to some of these problems.

## COMMUNICATION

- **Communication Process** (who is exposed to the information and issues within the process of getting it to people that need it)

Notes: Information collected by crews, water bombers, fire break equipment and air support units; was not being reliably presented to people on the ground in commanding positions due to the information supply chain (second/ third hand info). It is not unreasonable to expect that crucial information obtained by Miena control would be immediately forwarded on to all commanding TFS personnel that were operating crews in the areas relevant to the information in a timely manner. This was not the case and was only rectified towards the end of the Great Pine Tier Fire, midlands division.

- Sector commanders stationed at Bothwell in the midlands division were not exposed to this information via default or earlier enough in the day. Towards the end of the fire this was rectified, but if this information had been made available earlier strategic planning could have been conducted earlier by local commanders.
- Crews on the ground were not exposed to this information via default during the early stages of the Great Pine Tier Fire, midlands division. The transition of all information being passed on to Miena control and Not to the Bothwell control unless requested to information being passed on to Bothwell control automatically was not instantaneous.
- The Great Pine Tier Fire midlands division maps were generally well marked but not always accurate in determining where fire control lines were. On one occasion a map displayed completed control lines that were not there at all. (This data must be accurate for public safety and effective firefighting)

one example within 'division midlands was 6 kilometres of unburnt heavy timbered forest exposed to burnt ground which was both unpatrolled and a high flare up risk, this was marked as having a control line on the map prepared by Miena control when it was in fact inaccessible. (Diamond tier to Penstock lagoon)

If it had not been for a concerned local land owner that knew the area and brought this to the commander's attention, this would most certainly have remained a large risk. This is a prime example of the importance of accurate information being passed on to command centres. It also a good example of why it is important that both TFS personnel local to the fire ground area and the general public should be consulted and presented with TFS maps to both provide feed back as to whether the maps are correct and to aid in the distribution of up to date information.

- Communication between crews (UHF radio coverage blackspots in rough terrain & vehicle radio standards)  
Crews had a great deal of difficulty communicating with sector commanders and between units due to the undulating topography and thick scrubland.  
From personal experience it can be noted that there are TFS volunteer vehicles that have less than optimal UHF radio sets due to nil radio performance monitoring. Damaged or substandard antennas contributed to the UHF radio communication issues and could be rectified by annual radio set maintenance/ testing.

-Possible solutions to the poor UHF radio communication are; portable UHF repeater stations, Permanent UHF repeater stations or dedicated fire channel repeater network.

-Traditionally the central Highlands TFS volunteer brigade operate on UHF channel 12, repeaters may cause an overload of chatter if picked up by other crews operating in differing areas under the same UHF channel. This could be rectified by either; a UHF channel map (location locked radio channels) or low power directional UHF repeaters focused on the fire ground that they are dedicated to.

**Multi-Channel VHF function;** An additional option to the UHF radio transmission problems in undulating and heavily timbered locations could be to use the existing VHF radio sets that could monitor two channels at once and respond to the designated area chatter channel via default or with a single button press be switched to the local area firecom channel.

- Communication Between TFS volunteer crews and Firecom (VHF radio systems black spots)

-Possible solution, portable repeater stations or Permanent repeater stations.

- Fire com message relay attitude, It can be noted that on one particular occasion a TFS officer was attempting to communicate with fire com but fire com could not hear them due to signal failure, a fellow TFS fire fighter relayed the message to firecom.

Firecom then proceeded to inform the relaying fire fighter that it was not their authority to relay messages to them.

- Mobile phone coverage; complete black spots in the central highlands area (no emergency services coverage) are common and prevented contact between civilians and emergency services. This was personally experienced and prevented us from gaining any help from idle TFS volunteers unaware of our location or that there was an emergency. Our Private crews held off and extinguished 5km of heavy scrub fire on Bakers tier that threatened to jump highland lakes road a full 5 days before it did at the Shannon tier.
- Communication between local aircraft and interstate aircraft (Victorian fire communication equipment is not compatible with Tasmanian aircraft & the two aircraft cannot communicate on fire communication channels) source; anonymous TFS helicopter pilot.

- Communication between the police force and the Fire service.

Land owners were told to leave and flee weeks before the fire reached Highland lakes road, the Police were under the impression the fire was much closer than it actually was, causing unnecessary panic.

## SECTOR COMMANDERS

Sector commanders were changed like musical chairs during the duration of the Great Pine Tier midlands division fire, which further added to the knowledge deficiency of the fire front area, scale, risk points, local knowledge adoption and strategic areas.

-The usual local commander for the Bothwell Fire Brigade was on paid leave at the time of the Great Pine Tier Fire. Local Commanders should not be eligible for leave during High fire risk periods, it is unreasonable and a community risk to expect a commander unfamiliar with the local area, terrain, area contacts and fire behaviour to be able to command TFS volunteers and make strategic decisions.

-If taking leave during high fire risk periods is unavoidable and a scenario of catastrophic fire risk is experienced in the future, then a potential solution could be for the local commander in charge of the catastrophic fire risk area, to familiarise replacement sector commanders before a fire is imminent to the local area, terrain, area contacts and fire behaviour etc.

## PRIORITIES

- Asset protection (buildings) is the number one priority of the Tas Fire Service. This is understandable when there are people seeking refuge within a building. But when buildings have been cleared as unoccupied and the fire front is threatening key defensible advantage points, the bulk of resources should be dedicated to defending this vantage point. Example of advantage point; a location that if not held against the imminent fire front, will render the fire undefensible due to large areas of heavy bush, for a considerable area of the state of Tasmania. An example of this is the fire crossing highland lakes road and heading east towards 100's of properties/ houses infrastructure which would be undefensible until the fire reached the midlands highway, conditions dependant. During this example, the sector commanders inexperience of the local area hindered his ability to make crucial decisions, the result of this meant that the bulk of the onsite TFS units were allocated to protecting a the farm house 5km from the point at which the fire was threatening to jump Highland Lakes road. It was discovered by the TFS sector commander that the house was in fact surrounded by irrigated pasture and would only need one light unit to defend against ember attack if necessary. Upon the TFS unit's arrival at the farm house a call came from the sector commander that all units had been sent the farm house were to return to the approaching fire front. Upon returning TFS units returning to the pinch point it was discovered that the farm units defending the control lines in place had been overcome due to lack of support and the fire had jumped containment lines and subsequently jumped Highland Lakes road.

A local sector commander could have easily identified the home as being easily defensible and would also know the catastrophic effects of allowing the fire to jump highland lakes road.

This is a prime example of the paramount requirement that commanders can accurately identify key vantage points and priorities.

- The ideology that timber and farm land is not as important as a built structure is one that was evident during the Great Pine Tier fire. Priority was given to unoccupied buildings, due to this view firefighting efforts within timber areas were reduced subsequently allowing the fire to escalate significantly.

## RESTRICTIONS (ROAD BLOCK)

- Local farm fire tankers were for a significant period of the Great barren tier fire not permitted to enter the fire grounds by roadblock staff.
- Local general public could not leave fire grounds to get supplies under fear they would not be allowed, even when the fire was over 20km away from the road block. On numerous occasions this occurred. Local farmers helping fight the blazes on their own properties were for significant periods prevented from getting supplies (Diesel tankers for fire brake machinery) and help by the road blocks implemented by the fire service.
- Farm Stockman were refused entry and prevented from safeguarding their stock against the blaze.
- Farm firefighting crews were told by road block staff that they would be denied access the following morning and that they would not be able to return to the fire ground to defend their properties regardless of the conditions. This is despite these people having considerable local knowledge of the area.
- In the early 2000's the Bothwell Fire Brigade did a survey on the number of farm appliances available for fighting in the district. It was discovered that there were 43 appliances ranging from trailer units to heavy tankers. These were all prevented access to the great barren tier midlands division fire by the TFS road block.

## NIGHT ACTIVITY

Firefighting effectiveness dramatically improves during night fall. Conditions become favourable to putting out fires, cool air temperatures and the relative humidity increases, fire activity is greatly reduced and lower wind speed.

- Firefighting/ fire break construction during the night when it is most effective is currently not allowed by Tas Fire Service.
- Fire break construction was not monitored for quality or effectiveness.
- There is no standard when constructing a fire break, (width, clear of vegetation, experience, training, knowledge, response time)
- At times breaks were constructed that were not sufficient and would have easily stopped the blaze had they been.
- Night drivers of machines would greatly increase break making capacity.
- Night crews would greatly prevent hotspot flare ups during the heat of the day.
- It can be noted that machines that are on call for the TFS should have a maximum allowable response time if they are to be paid to be on call.

## CHANGES IN CLIMATIC CONDITIONS

- Dry lightning has historically not been experienced in Tasmania. Dry lightning created over 2000 fires over two days needed extinguishing which stretched the TFS resources to the limit. Many of these fires were only accessible on bush tracks and roads, once maintained by logging operations. These roads and tracks are gradually falling into disrepair, without regular maintenance from logging operations these areas will become inaccessible. It is within the Tas Fire Service and the Tasmanian governments best interest to ensure these roads and tracks are maintained. (In the past The Tasmania Fire service has maintained those roads and tracks, but no longer does)

## BUSH FIRE FIGHTING SAFETY POLICY

- During the Great Barren Tier Bush Fire, the Tas Fire Service command centre in Launceston ordered that no Volunteer Tas Fire Service fire fighters enter wooded areas as it was unsafe to do so. This rendered the Volunteer force useless as the majority of the fire was within wooded areas. On one day in particular, TFS units stationed on the Highland Lakes road, were not allowed to enter wooded areas that private farm firefighting crews were holding a blaze. As a result of this decision made by commanders in Launceston the private crews lost the containment line which was safely accessible and had a clear escape route. Once the fire reached Highland lakes road it was an unstoppable fire ball. The private crews were holding the fire at bay with lite tankers, had they been aided by TFS units they would have undoubtedly held the blaze.
- It is not logical that a commander 85-90km away can make the call for the entire volunteer fire brigade, preventing them from entering wooded areas without being at the fire ground.

I would hope that the commissioner can find the time to speak to the people who were actively fighting that fire. Especially farm volunteers.

William Bowden

12months volunteer fire fighter

Scott Bowden

Councillor of the central Highlands Council

36 years fire fighting experience

Richard Bowden

Volunteer fighter 1947-2017

10 years municipal rep on the state fire advisory council

16 years on the state fire commission