

CRONSTEDT REVIEW

Brett Burgess

2018-19 FIRE SEASON

30/4/2019

Dear Review Team Members

Please accept my submission to the review of the 2018-19 bushfire season in Tasmania.

My submission pertains to the Rivaux Road fire.

By way of back ground, I am a 59 year old male and a life- long resident of Geeveston.

I have had a nearly 40 year career with the Tasmania Fire Service as a volunteer Firefighter , served seven years as an officer of the Geeveston Fire Brigade including three years as Brigade Chief. I was also the Group Officer of the Esperance Group of Fire Brigades (Geeveston, Glendevie, Dover and Southport Brigades) for 10 years and also was a Volunteer Training Instructor for seven years training volunteer firefighters throughout southern Tasmania and the Midlands area. I have also sat on and held the secretary position on several spin off organisations including The Retained Firefighters Association of Tasmania as well as the Huon Valley Fire Management Committee. Obviously over this many years I have attended many campaign fires, filling many different roles throughout this District, many other parts of Tasmania also twice deployed to wildfires in New South Wales in 1994 and again in 2002 so I believe I may be well experienced on the subject and hope this submission is of benefit to you.

All happenings were observed by me at my property at 309 Arve Road which is situated approximately 500 meters east of the state forest – privately owned land interface during the period 22nd January - 4th February 2019 whilst waiting for the fire to emerge from the bush.

All my opinions expressed in this submission are based on actual happenings and are presented without prejudice as I have nothing personal to gain and again sincerely hope my efforts may be of help to the review panel, therefore a benefit for the community.

I have addressed the Terms Of Reference to the best of my capabilities. Those not addressed are because I believe that I am not in a position to make relevant and beneficial comment.

Rivoux Road

- 1 The main theory what caused the fire seems to be a Dry Lightning Strike and the response may have been timely but the subsequent handling and management was woefully inadequate because the fire was not contained or extinguished in favorable conditions. Although many rumors exist regarding inter agency arguments taking place about who's land the fire was on and who was responsible for control, the fire was still growing and not enough was being done to bring it under control. One thing I believe is true---If that same fire occurred some years previous the then, "Forestry Tasmania" would have engaged every resource available to them to it and would have had a adequate mineral earth fire break established around it in days (if needed) and mopped up using their own crews alongside Tasmania Fire Service volunteer crews and any other personnel needed, a strategy which was used successfully for many years. We have our Politicians (particularly the greens) to thank for the closing or at least major down scaling of forestry operations in Tasmania including Forestry Tasmania. Whilst millions of dollars' worth of fire-fighting machinery was being sold and shipped to the mainland and personnel with countless years of experience and expertise in this field were being made redundant, many people in this area asked the question "What will happen if there is a big bush-fire now?" We now know the answer.
- 2 The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings were at times useful and at others dramatically over done, "Death by a thousand cuts" and sometimes non-existent. In my opinion following the Dunalley Fire, some could argue that Tas Fire Service was somewhat caught with its trousers down, not issuing out adequate warnings to the public and was determined for that not to happen again,(hence dramatically over done) which in the end caused complacency and people not heeding advice. I attended the first public meeting at the Geeveston School regarding the Rivoux Road fire with the intent to gain as much information as I could which in turn would determine whether I would relocate or stay and defend. Stuart Males (South West District Officer) addressed the meeting and his main points were that a Major Fire was approaching Geeveston and he wasn't going to Sugar Coat anything and that things would be bad and everyone should relocate as soon as possible to a safer place, also that there was going to be a TASK FORCE in the town the following day. I asked the question on behalf of those contemplating staying and defending as to how much support if any, we may receive from Tas Fire Service? He

replied that he couldn't promise anything to anyone as conditions would determine how resources would be placed. I was satisfied with this reply and understood fully his reasoning. I wanted to ask a follow up question as to what his TASK FORCE consisted of, so I would know exactly how many and what types of Fire Appliances would be in the town at least, but the microphone was promptly taken off me and moved on to other question askers. In order to get my follow up question asked I got my daughter who was sitting next to me to raise her hand and the microphone returned finally. Stuart Males reply to my question was that he wasn't sure what his TASK FORCE consisted of because he forgot to bring his list to the meeting but there would be some Heavy Tankers, Medium Tankers and Light Tankers. There is no doubt that the Tas Fire Service wanted everyone to relocate and those who wished to stay and defend were considered somewhat a BURDEN.

- 3 The timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy,-- I believe I touched on this in Terms of Reference 1 but further add that it seemed to me that although some fire appliances could be seen at times, there was no actual firefighting happening. Crews seemed to be waiting for the fire to come out of the bush for many days. After some days of waiting there were some reports of vigilante back burns occurring in the area, a dangerous and reprehensible activity at best. The question should be asked, Why? An answer maybe that those involved didn't have any confidence in those managing the fire because nothing seemed to be happening, or if it was, no information was forthcoming for days on end to those who chose to stay and defend. Further to this, I have been told by those involved that some crews were breaking away from sectors and going on sight- seeing cruises because of boredom which indicates a breakdown at sector command level. I can only reiterate that the professionalism, resources and expertise of the former Forestry Tasmania firefighting department cannot be overstated. For many years a very good rapport existed between fire agencies in this area with information sharing, inter agency back up crews during fire incidents and local brigade Officers and members attending via invite to Forestry Tasmania high intensity regeneration coup burns for training and development purposes. This rapport was further enhanced through the existence of the Huon Valley Fire Management Committee which met regularly but apparently was disbanded some years ago which I will expand on later.
- 4 The impact and effectiveness of fuel management programs in the fire effected area-Although the Rivoux Road fire burned mainly state forest, for many days it was encroaching into privately owned land on a massive front and as the former Group Officer of this area it was of particular interest and concern to me because as far as I could ascertain little if any effective firefighting was taking place in the bush. I

live at the top end or Western end of Arve Road where all indications would predict that the fire would emerge from the bush into tinder dry paddocks and beyond. With high Westerly winds pushing the fire in an Easterly direction, Geeveston was in its path. The fire finally spotted halfway down a hill named Spion Kap 200 meters west of my property and a sudden wind change {the Sea Breeze} reached the top end of Arve road at exactly the same time and pushed the fire back onto itself. I would not believe it if I hadn't witnessed it. At that point in time no Fire Appliances could be seen in the area and my daughter rang 000. Make no mistake, twice Geeveston has been saved from fire by the Sea Breeze in my life time, first time February in 1967 second time January 30th 2019. What has prompted me to respond to this review is the complacency which exists within this community toward wildfire mitigation and prevention. Many land owners and the Huon Valley council have a lot to answer for. Major fuel build up along roadsides and beyond are an unnecessary threat to life and property but continues to go unaddressed to the time of writing this. The last broad acre fuel reduction which I can recall was carried out by the Esperance Group of Brigades at Southport during November 1999. I now refer to Premier Hodgeman's promise of extra funding towards a hazard and fuel reduction burn off program following the Dunnulley fires, I have written to Tasmania Fire Service South West District Officer asking the following- Have any hazard reduction burns been conducted within the South West District under this program? If so, where and when?-----How many hazard reduction burns (which were once a normal part of brigade activities) have been carried out by brigades or groups of brigades in the recently effected areas in the last say 2-5-10 years?----- How has District Staff encouraged brigades or groups of brigades to undertake hazard reduction burns within the recently effected areas and how are these brigades supported by District staff during hazard reduction burns?-----How does the Tasmanian Fire Service or District Staff engage with land owners (many newcomers to this community) to take responsibility for proper land management of their properties?-----What is the current status of the Huon Valley Fire Management Committee?-----What is the view of the Tasmania Fire Service of those residents who choose to stay and defend and do you think they are supported enough? I believe these questions to be fair and relevant ones but I have received no answer from Tas Fire Service. Maybe the Review Panel could ask them on my behalf. I should point out at this time that The Huon Valley Fire Management Committee met once quarterly, more often approaching and during the fire season. It consisted of representatives of all brigades in the Huon Valley, representative from Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife, Tasmania Police and Huon Valley Council {abatement officer}. Its purpose was among other things to share information between

firefighting agencies, reports on brigade activities and fire hazard reporting etc and action taken by council. I contacted newly elected Mayor Bee Enders asking as to the status or demise of the committee and she stated that she thinks it was disbanded some years ago. I have also written to Premier Hodgeman regarding his promise of funding toward fuel reduction burn offs following the Dunnalley fires and have included a copy of his reply in this submission for you. He has provided some interesting facts and figures but prompts further questions, the most obvious for me being,-- were the coup fires part of Forestry Tasmania - Sustainable Timbers Tasmania regeneration coup burns which would have happened anyway? Rubbery Figures or not? Again maybe the Review Panel can find out considering the amount of time it took for me to get a reply. During the ten years which I spent as Group Officer of the Esperance Group, it was common practice to conduct an annual Group Exercise Day prior to the fire season. The purpose of these days were to a general get together of all brigades within the Group to familiarize ourselves with new brigade members, new equipment acquired and participate in some sort of exercise for training purposes. Occasionally the group exercise would take the form of a hazard reduction burn requiring the resources of all brigades within the group. The hazard reduction burn at Southport previously mentioned was one such example. The following year I planned on an another more larger hazard reduction burn in the Geeveston area involving land between Kent Street and Scotts Road. This particular parcel of land was involved in the Black Tuesday 1967 disaster and by all accounts contributed significantly to the spread of fire to Whale Point Hill, and across the Huon River into Cygnet and beyond to Snug. Obviously such an exercise took a tremendous amount of hours of my time to plan out, liaising with land owners, Councilors for funding for machine contractors to repair overgrown roads utilized as control lines, but everything was falling into place. At that point in time the current District Officer retired and was replaced by another. I spoke to the new District Officer about the proposed exercise, filling him in as to what had been done so far and what else I had planned before the burn could go ahead. He came to Geeveston and we both went to the area where he stated that he wasn't happy with the idea and could not support it because the fire may break out. I believe I argued my point as best I could regarding ideal weather conditions, further resources being deployed from our neighboring Group (Huon Group) and the time I had already spent planning the exercise so far. He went on to say that he would only be happy if some member of the public was to cause a fire in the area and brigades responded to it in an emergency situation therefore could not be blamed if anything went wrong. I then formed the opinion that too many Officers within the chain of command of the Tasmanian Fire Service don't wish to have their name associated with anything

which may pose a risk to their reputation among their peers, moreover their superiors in their quest to climb the chain, (maybe that is why no back burning was being done as the fire moved south westerly and when conditions were favorable), but my point is that it further supports the lack of support given to volunteer brigades by some District Staff relating to hazard reduction. This is further galvanized when Ivery recently asked the Brigade Chief of the Dover Brigade " How well does the South West District Staff encourage your brigade to do hazard reduction"? His reply was simply "Well mate, they don't, they discourage you" Summing up....My main concerns of the Rivoux Road fire was the spread offire which was unnecessary and caused the destruction of a forest. It is all but common knowledge in this district that Sustainable Timbers Tasmania notified Parks and Wildlife to the fire on land they were responsible for and not enough,if anything was done about it. Government inter agency squabbles between overzealous stakeholders were first witnessed by me in New South Wales in 1994 and were unheard of in Tasmania. The complacency toward wildfire prevention is at a crisis point in the Huon valley and the Huon Valley Council is responsible and should take responsibility by maintaining their roadside verges to begin with. Many newcomers to this valley have no idea about managing their properties regarding fuel build up. Some properties have been purchased by investors living on the mainland and go unchecked as to fuel build up. District Staff of the Tasmanian Fire Service should again start engaging with volunteer brigades regarding hazard reduction burns which they are capable of conducting.

If we go down the path of the mainland and choose to let fuel build to continue on privately owned land, then run away when wildfire poses a threat, then the people who maintain their land and choose to stay and defend should be given more support.

Brett Burgess



TASMANIA
PREMIER OF TASMANIA

15 APR 7.019

Mr Brett Burgess
brettb3@bigpond.com

Dear

Thank you for your correspondence of 6 February 2019, regarding fuel reduction burning in the Huon Valley. I apologise for the delay in responding.

I am advised that since 2001, there have been 323 planned and executed burns in the Huon Valley, and that 90% of these burns are coupe burns.

The Tasmania Fire Service website has a dedicated page for Fuel Reduction Burning, including a map of the current, proposed and completed burns conducted by the Fuel Reduction Program. This can be found at <http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/Show?pageld=colFuelReductionProgram>.

Following any major fire event there are always lessons to be learned and the best way for that to occur is through a robust, independent review, with input from experts. The Tasmanian Government has commissioned the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council, the peak body responsible for representing fire, emergency services and land management agencies, to undertake an independent review into the 2018/2019 bushfires.

I encourage you to make a submission to the review to ensure specific matters of interest to you are raised with the review team. If you have any questions about the review you may contact Dr Felicity Novy on 61 66 5592, or by email to AFAC.RevieYv@dpfem.tas.gov.au.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your long standing commitment to the Tasmanian community in your capacity as a volunteer firefighter with the Tasmanian Fire Service.

Once again, thank you for writing to me.

Yours sincerely

Will Hodgman MP
Premier

From: Vincent, Anna (DPaC) <Anna.Vincent@dpac.tas.gov.au>
To: 'brettb3@bigpond.com' <brettb3@bigpond.com>
Date: Feb 5, 2019 9:22:49 AM
Subject: Enquiry to the Premier regarding the current bushfires

Dear Mr Burgess,

Thank you for your enquiry to the Premier yesterday at his Kingston office in relation to the Fuel Reduction Burning.

I have been advised of the following:

In 2014, the Government invested \$28.5 million over four years for an Australian-first scientific program of strategically targeted burns, to reduce the amount of potential fuel for a bushfire. In the 2018-19 Budget, the Government committed to ongoing funding of \$9 million a year, taking the total investment to \$55 million.

The aim of the Government's Fuel Reduction Burning Program is to strategically reduce bushfire risk in areas that provide the most protection to Tasmanian communities. The Program represents a contemporary approach to bushfire mitigation and community fire safety. It reflects modern thinking and research in emergency management, and recommendations from recent bushfire enquiries and a Royal Commission following devastating bushfire events in south-east Australia.

Through the program, Tasmania is leading Australia in taking a strategic risk-based approach that encompasses both private and public land, and is whole of government in implementation. The Program's partners are: Tasmania Fire Service, Parks and Wildlife Service and Sustainable Timber Tasmania.

Over the first four years of the program, 533 fuel reduction burns were completed across the state, encompassing over 63,752 hectares, of which 10,848 hectares was private land.

Tasmania is one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world and preparing for bushfires is everyone's responsibility. We are always going to experience bushfires in Tasmania, and one of the objectives of fuel reduction burning is to make fires that do occur easier to control by firefighters.

Since its inception in 2014, the scientific and strategic approach of Tasmania's Fuel Reduction Program has contributed to making our communities significantly safer from bushfires, and bushfire risk analysis has shown that the state-wide risk has now reduced by 4% over the last four years.

I hope this information is of use to you.

Cheers Anna

Anna Vincent
Electorate Officer