

In January 2019 the Central Highlands towns and communities of Miena, Liawenee, Reynolds Neck, Brandum, Breona, Cramp Bay, Tods Corner, Arthurs Lake, Bronte, Waddamama, Lake Echo, Shannon, Synots Sugarloaf, Bashan Plains, Hermitage and surrounds were threatened by bushfires over several weeks. Reports during that period suggest that the fire proved problematic for the Tasmania Fire Service, Parks & Wildlife Services and Sustainable Timbers Tasmania to contain, this may have been due to the difficult terrain on the Central Plateau which caused problems with accessing the fire in a number of locations, and hence why it took several weeks to extinguish.

Reports from Tasmania Fire Service stated that 5 fixed wing and 8 helicopters, were used during the operation for water bombing to slow the spread of the fire. The Examiner reported that around 30 to 40 people were evacuated from Miena on Monday afternoon the 21 January after the Great Pine Tier fire broke containment lines and crossed the River Ouse. Bothwell Town Hall was setup as an evacuation centre by Central Highlands Council that morning. While a number of the local community members meet at the Miena Community Hall. During that period emergency services personnel had a strong presence in the Great Pine Tier area and the Highland Lakes Road was closed to all traffic from the 21 January.

It is Council's understanding that on January 22 the loss of the nearby Skittle Ball Plains Homestead changed the game. The property was in a clearing and away from vegetation, considered "defendable" by authorities. Despite that, the homestead was overwhelmed by showering embers and the popular destination was left in ruins.

ABC reported that conditions at Miena hit their peak on Friday, January 25, which authorities had tipped to be the "worst" day of the fire season. The combination of hot weather, low humidity, wind and fire already in the landscape led to firefighters setting out a stark choice for Tasmanians thinking of staying to fight the flames.

ABC reported that TFS Chief Officer Chris Arnol said "It's going to go black, Anyone who stays is going to have embers dropping all around them. It will be hot, windy, and dark, and there will be fire all around you." "Will you stay, or will you choose to leave tonight?"

By January 26 ABC reported that Miena is still under a community alert, however it is no longer under immediate threat from fire. The Great Pine Tier Fire has moved on, and other communities are now watching its progress closely — no doubt hoping for outcome similar to Miena's.

By now the Great Pine Tier fire had burnt almost 40,000 hectares with significant fire activity in the Waddamama area including Bronte, the eastern edge of Lake Echo, Shannon, Synots Sugarloaf, Bashan Plains, Hermitage and surrounds. These fires were still putting our communities at risk on the Sunday. A state-wide total fire ban was still in place and a number of community meetings were held that day, as both local and interstate crews continue work to control the blazes under difficult weather conditions.

On the 27 January it was also reported that a protection plan for the Walls of Jerusalem National Park had been enacted and remote area teams moved into the area.

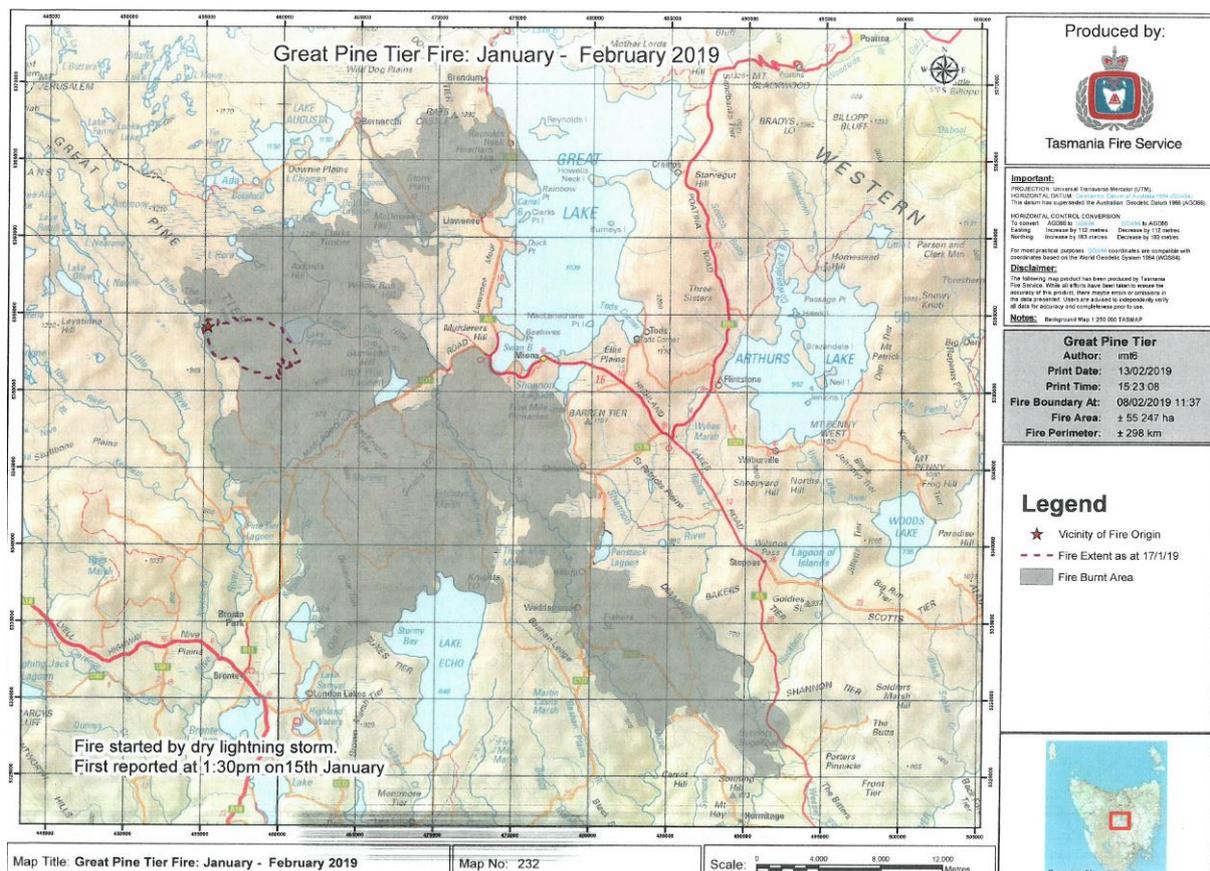
By Tuesday the 12 February, Tasmania received its first snow of the year, which was falling on areas that were threatened by fierce bushfires on the Central Plateau. At that time ABC reported that there are still 34 active fires across Tasmania, including in areas that have now received snowfall. The Meteorologist Rachel McInerney said the snow was unusual for this summer. "We've had quite

warm above average temperatures and not very much rainfall, but it's not that unusual for Tasmania to receive a significant cold front at any time of the year that can bring snow," she said.

Parks and Wildlife Service reported on the 20 February that the Great Pine Tier fire has burnt 55,328 ha and impacted a number of Highland Lakes communities. The fire has been mostly inactive for a number of days now.

Parks and Wildlife Service took actions to prevent the fire spreading into the Walls of Jerusalem National Park and western lakes area. Firefighters constructed containment lines, consisting of a handline and sprinklers in the Lake Ada area. The firebreak is a combination of slashed line that follows an existing track and a section of handline.

The calmer weather over the last few weeks in February meant that the Great Pine Tier fire has not progressed for some time, although there are still active hotspots. A Parks and Wildlife Service desktop analysis indicates that a total of 2,399.6 ha of Very High and Extreme fire sensitive vegetation occurs within this fire boundary. Only 0.2 ha of this value is of Extreme fire sensitivity. Most of the fire sensitive communities occur in the northern section of the fire, to the west of Liawenee.



Fortunately there were no lives lost, and reports suggest that three structures were destroyed within the Central Plateau, with a number of shacks receiving some minor damage. This Great Pine Tier fire had the potential to travel down the valley and across the plains to Bothwell or Oatlands if it was not for the firefighting equipment support and knowledge of our dedicated farming property owners and workers.

Reports in 'The Australian' by Tasmanian Correspondent Matthew Denholm suggest *'This week, senior firefighters have repeatedly referred to the difficulty tackling the fires because of "high fuel loads". They have also referred to "stretched ... tired" firefighters and spoken about the sudden loss of volunteer firefighters on Tuesday, when they had to return to work after the long weekend.'* At the same time, firefighters in the south were dealing with a large bushfire in the Huon Valley south of Hobart and the Gell River Bushfire in the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park.

The Great Pine Tier fire has caused significant interruption to our communities' tourist season as the fire approached its peak on Friday, January 25 before the Australia Day long weekend and this downturn has continued through to the Easter holiday period of 2019.

Central Highlands Council believes protecting and reassuring our community in circumstances of an emergency like the Great Pine Tier Fire that threatens the peace, stability and livelihoods of our small communities is an important role of the State Government departments like Tasmania Police, Tasmania Fire Service, State Emergency Services, Parks & Wildlife Services and Sustainable Timbers Tasmania. However by providing grant funding and resourcing local government organisations so they have the ability to develop community resilience will in turn strengthen individual collective capability within the community to achieve the best outcome.

The following areas of concern have been noted by Council from our community members during the Great Pine Tier Fire:

- Need for better communication between Tasmania Fire Service, Parks & Wildlife Services, Sustainable Timbers Tasmania, volunteers and property owners working together in fire incidents;
- Need for earlier usage of heavier firefighting equipment (aircrafts) operations at the start of a fire;
- Need for mobile communication towers to be prioritised for local fire brigades (Bronte area had limited mobile communication for weeks);
- Need for the Tasmania Fire Service Incident Controller to have local knowledge of the area, not an interstate person;
- The Tasmania Fire Service website provides information on current fires and warnings however the fireground mapping must be updated more frequently for local community members;
- That the State Government ensures communication between property owners that are still in the fireground, be better managed and contactable so to provide updates on the fire direction and speed;
- Who to consult to determine what local resources are available? More communication required between Tasmania Fire Service Incident Controller, local fire brigades, Central Highlands Emergency Management Co-Ordinator and local property owners regarding local resources;
- More consultation with community groups eg Lions Club, CWA, Church Groups, Sports Groups including local football clubs, cricket clubs etc;

- Tasmanian Police Pass System should be review as it caused issues with farming property owners and workers accessing the fireground to put out spot fires in the Bashan Plains, Hermitage and surrounding areas;
- Issues fighting fires within the World Heritage area of the Central Plateau does the Tasmania Fire Service Incident Controller have the authority to put out a fire without approval from Parks & Wildlife Services;
- Backburning approval process on the fireground appeared slow and required Regional approval taking hours, (Council's understanding is that backburning is designed to steer the fire away from major assets and allow fire crews to link up containment lines);
- Review of the Central Highlands Emergency Management Plan and how can it be improved?
- The adequacy of firefighting resources;
- The adequacy of fuel-reduction burns, as the fuel load within the Central Plateau seem to significantly influence the fire's intensity;
- Models for predicting fuel hazard ratings, fuel loads and calculating fuel moisture should be reviewed;

The following areas of concern have been noted from residents at Bronte Park and Brady's Lake during and since the Great Pine Tier Fire:

- ABC Radio frequency 936 AM is hard to receive on radios within shacks in the Bronte Park and Brady's Lake areas due to the terrain of the area, hence limited communication for residents;
- Mobile communication limited in the Bronte Park and Brady's lake area due to issues with the Sugarloaf Telstra mobile communication tower;
- No local Tasmanian ABC television in the Bronte Park and Brady's lake area, hence no information on the Great Pine Tier bushfire. Most residents can only receive Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) which is a satellite-delivered service that provides commercial and national (ABC and SBS) broadcasting services. Local Tasmanian ABC is limited on VAST television;
- Tasmania Fire Service website provided little or old information on current fires and warnings;
- The Grey Nomads were still camping around Bronte Lagoon, Dee Lagoon and Brady's Lake during the Emergency Warning period with little or no knowledge of the Great Pine Tier Fire;
- Lots of mixed messages in the community, maybe there is a need to have a new type of communication position a Lead Co-Ordinator from SES providing feedback to communities in the fireground;
- Should be someone at the local fire brigades during a fire to provide community members with advice;

- How does Tasmanian Police communicate with people in remote areas like Dee Lagoon, Lake Echo, Waddamama and the Shannon if they do not have a mobile, home phone or internet;
- Limited fuel for emergency services in the Bronte area, no diesel for 50km;
- Are the warnings given to early;
- Does the Tasmanian Police have the contact details of residents in the Bronte Lagoon, Dee Lagoon and Brady's Lake area for evacuations;
- Local fire brigade members worked long hours with limited resources, local residents were happy to make meals if required, but no feedback provided ;
- Copper telephone network about to be removed, most older residents do not have satellite NBN services;
- Emergency Assistance Grants not available to residents in the Bronte Lagoon, Dee Lagoon and Brady's Lake area as they could not get to lodge a form, lots of hardship cases;
- Why was the Tasmania Fire Service local fire brigade not permitted to put the fire out in the World Heritage area of the Central Plateau on the 15 January 2019 after the lightning storm ignited the Great Pine Tier Fire;
- How do we encourage more people to join Tasmania Fire Service or State Emergency Services; and
- Our Tasmania Fire Service Volunteers Officers have a high standard of training and knowledge and know the difficult terrain on the Central Plateau.

The following areas of concern were raised by Councillor Robert Cassidy regarding the Great Pine Tier Fire:

- Need for more information flow for local residents, as residents experienced falling ash on their properties in the Bothwell area, lots of mixed messages in the community, maybe there is a need to have a new type of communication position from TFS or SES providing feedback to communities in the fireground on a daily basis, like a one stop shop;
- Removal of long dry grass from properties, property owners need to take more responsibility in a proactive way to mitigate the potential for inadvertent spread of bushfires, by cutting their long grasses and weeds, bordering other properties and homes, especially in towns; and
- Council should consider a green waste and dead wood collection service, at least once a year like the bulk trash collection, and then property owners and home owners could get rid of the extra fuel that accumulates around properties.

The following systemic issues regarding the Great Pine Tier Fire were raised by Councillor Anthony Archer:

- Prefire control

The fires should not have occurred particularly of the scale they did. The policy of ignoring local knowledge and prioritizing other values over avoiding a catastrophic fire needs to be addressed as a priority. Numerous examples exist of property owners not being permitted to conduct controlled burns in some cases years before this fire, the values being purported to be protected (plants and eagles nests) have now gone.

The initial response was not serious enough or managed well. Confusion around World Heritage area fires needs to be formally resolved. Back burns were reportedly left unattended by Tasmania Fire Service staff further exacerbating the fires.

A dedicated well-resourced group needs to be established to implement controlled burning and liaise with property owners and managers. This group needs to be also skilled in forest fire management. The greater public good needs to be considered in Tasmania Fire Service fire management rather than rigid policy implementation. If fires are best fought or controlled at night this needs to be implemented, if back burns need to be done on total fire ban days this needs to happen.

There needs to be recognition of the inherent risk associated with these activities and managed accordingly but not prohibited. Legislation needs to be enacted to facilitate this in the event of fire emergency declarations

- Central Highlands Councils response

The evacuation process seems to have been first rate however in my view the availability of plant and staff should have been much more proactive. It obviously needs to be done with Tasmania Fire Service supervision.

The financial burden placed on councils should be shared.

The marshalling of resources must be, much more proactive with the council emergency response staff given clear direction to notify the fire authorities each time an event occurs what physical resources the council has available.

Helicopter access insurance issues with Council's across the State should have been resolved, as it was not until the 11 March 2019 that The Honourable Michael Ferguson MP, The Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Management advised the Mayor that Tasmania Fire Service will become self-sufficient in the area of aircraft landing in the future.

- Local knowledge

In the recent fires a lack of local knowledge was a serious impediment and produced poor outcomes and risked lives and property.

Tasmania Fire Service staff must only take holidays during the winter months as was previously the policy.

The Tasmania Fire Service staff and organisation must be sensitive to volunteers. Assets removed from volunteer units creates poor moral. The volunteer units and resources should not be reduced as has happened in Bothwell as the volunteers lose heart if not supported by Tasmania Fire Service staff. One unit removed another down sized

- Broader consultation

Liaison with all potential parties not just volunteers and affected land owners also farms with units and stockmen, council, any other businesses or individuals with resources.

Ongoing, all year round communication should be reinstated between property owners and Tasmania Fire Service.

The controlled burning policy must be adaptable.

- Access to the fireground

This has been the major problem with poor communication and poor implementation. Lives put at risk : examples young women with babies not prepared to leave the fire area; people with livestock or requirement for medication particularly the elderly won't leave because no simple process from quick entry, this must be sorted!! While well intentioned it's not working

Could easily be addressed by showing a driver's license to display residency to gain access is all that's required.

Risk should be accepted by parties wishing access to feed livestock etc.

At the Bothwell end of the Great Pine Tier Fire, additional assets were requested by the Local Incident Controller, land owners left their properties to provide additional support but were prevented from accessing the fireground as it had been deemed too dangerous to enter. This left the volunteers in the fire more exposed and without back up putting their lives at risk and leaving very frustrated volunteers watching the fire approaching and not being able to support their family, neighbours and staff. Fire trucks for evacuation etc.

- Communications

Need to be state-wide and improved.

Temporary communications should be set up for phone access on the fireground for radio as well.

Policy in remote areas should facilitate that Mobile Network Operators (Optus, Telstra and Vodafone) should be allowed to share existing towers.

- Devolution to local Tasmania Fire Service management

Needs to be simpler and undertaken at the local level by the trained people on the fire front.

Back burn example: managed from Launceston, submit a plan, travel to reception to send in, then a study on each burn is done then get message back. Where there is reception, Crazy stuff!! Ground conditions may have changed.

- Local resources management

Coordinate and train farm units plus help with maintenance and checking in good order. There needs to be a budget for this.

Occupational Health and Safety issues with farm and council staff could be dealt with through legislation plus up skilling with out of season training (insurance etc. are big employer issues).

Sale of Tasmania Fire Service equipment to be promoted to local farmers and businesses.

- Asset prioritisation and lack of skill by Tasmania Fire Service management

The city based Tasmania Fire Service has no idea of the asset values in bush fires. Millions of dollars' worth of timber and livestock were abandoned to concentrate on built assets worth a fraction of the value and many were protected by irrigation and cleared areas in any event.

The containment lines did not recognise the values nor were physical breaks prepared as fall back positions quickly enough. The urban based fire service management must be upskilled to actually fight bush fires not grass fires.

Mechanical breaks should be used much more extensively and earlier in future fires, years of experience show this to be a very important tool in bush fire management.

The TFS policy of not fighting fires in the bush or at night must be rectified.

Should you require any further information please contact the Deputy General Manager, Mr Adam Wilson on 03 6286 3202.