

Submission from Ms Robyn Lewis on behalf of the Central Highlands Wildlife Group.

Monday 29 April 2019, 1400 hours.

Ms Lewis is making a verbal submission in both a personal capacity and as Public Officer of the Central Highlands Wildlife Group. (She is a botanist and economist, with a lot of experience in project management and regional economic development).

The Central Highlands Wildlife Group currently consists of 33 active on-the-ground supporters who are all residents (either full or part-time) of the Central Highlands and who were directly impacted by the fires, plus over 240 supporters, and growing.

Terms of Reference No. 1

One member of the Group (who was involved in the firefighting) commented that the fire on the Central Plateau could have been extinguished on Day 2 with the use of a dozer, however access to the Region to use a dozer was denied by the Parks and Wildlife Service. The damage would have been minimal relative to what actually occurred (55,000 ha burnt). Use of dozers would have been the most effective method to extinguish/contain the fires quickly at the outset.

Terms of Reference No. 2

The message sent by text instructing people to evacuate Miena did not reach some people who were out in the field conducting clearing operations, as they did not hear the phone due to machinery noise. There was a door knock conducted after the message but some people had already left. The evacuation messaging was adequate but could perhaps have been better (eg repeat the text message at intervals). Some people did not receive messages at all. Note that phone coverage in the area is not good.

At some time after the fires, and when the town was evacuated (apart from those who chose to stay, eg were at the eastern end where the risk was lower), there was a further door knock concerning the access to grants. As many people had evacuated, they never received the notification – some were unable to return for 2-3 weeks. There were no fliers left under doors etc. This is clearly wrong. In addition, the timeframe to apply for grants (once people actually found out about them) of three weeks was not adequate, as some people were unable to return immediately, and were not in a position to apply for grants while still housed in temporary accommodation elsewhere, without computer access, etc. and stressed out.

It was discovered that business grants were only available if businesses were registered for the GST. Many small businesses (turnover under \$75,000) did not qualify and this needs to be looked at. It is the small operators who need this assistance most. Most businesses in the area would fall under this threshold. For example, a trout guide in the Group received no compensation for a significant loss of bookings, including client cancellations both at the time and for future bookings,

his need to evacuate boats and equipment, being unable to take this all back until all roads fully reopened, cost of evacuation, etc.

There was also confusion between communication with politician speak - with no/little knowledge of what is available/was happening on the ground - agency communications, and communication through the media and public broadcaster. Different advice was being given, the criteria were inconsistent and there was no coherence to the communications. There should be coherent, defined processes to follow in the event of a bushfire – it's happened before, it WILL happen again, and by now one would think that there should be processes in place that actually worked, rather than ad hoc, knee-jerk, uncoordinated reactions to these sorts of natural disasters.

Terms of Reference No. 3

There was little or no consideration given to the environment. Considerable and commendable effort was put into protection of infrastructure and power lines but wildlife was largely treated as if it has zero value. Wildlife is not only of value in itself but is an important part of the cultural community of the Central Highlands. Wildlife is important to people and is of significant value. People also suffered a high degree of stress dealing with injured wildlife after the fires (eg euthanasing animals with their feet burnt off, etc) and now with dealing with starving animals. (The biggest cause of wildlife deaths from the Dunalley fires was later starvation of the survivors).

There is a feeling in the Central Highlands that the fire in that area is the one that people forgot, with emphasis on the township and infrastructure, forgetting the bush and mostly leaving it to burn, and most attention going to the fires in the Huon and SW. Just because the community is small does not mean that it can be overlooked.

Terms of Reference No. 4

Preventative management programs were woeful/non-existent, with private land owners not being allowed to burn due to heritage considerations. Increasing fuel loads needs to be looked at, as the fire was much more intense and destructive than would otherwise have occurred. A risk mitigation strategy needs to be put in place. The Waddamana area ecology is totally devastated and the high temperature of the fires caused significant damage on the upper plateau, burning deep into the soil and killing plant roots and seeds. In some areas there is absolutely nothing remaining alive, and it looks like a war zone. (See photos on Central Highlands Tasmania Wildlife Group on Facebook). Vegetation recovery will take a very long time.

Terms of Reference No. 5

Can't really comment on command, control etc. Their NGO didn't exist then, but even if it had, they would have mostly been evacuated.

Terms of Reference No. 6

Water bombers were needed right from the start. Need to look at a strategy for the future.

Ms Lewis later paid for a flight over the area to see where the worst affected areas were in terms of wildlife impact, and accessibility for volunteers. She requested aerial photographs from TFS several times who refused to release them. Aerial photographs ie actual evidence are valuable in helping plan for wildlife treatment and rehabilitation.

Nothing has been said from any agency about rehabilitation and recovery plans for the area (eg vegetation/habitat). Her group are the only ones feeding the animals, which needs to go right through winter through to spring, with no other help being made available, other than private donations to buy feed. A case of “out of sight out of mind” and wildlife having no voice. If it were people homeless and starving to death it would be a different story.

General Comments

The Central Highlands Wildlife Group is made up of disparate members including hunters, fishers and conservationists who have come together to assist animals. The processes to get recognition from Wildcare or to get access to PWS land is very onerous/slow. Bureaucracy is not designed to act quickly. An existing ‘early response’ care group within WildCare only got permission to enter the Huon and SW burnt regions after two months. Ms Lewis’ group still have not got formal permission from Parks for the areas they control (although has obtained Police and Council approval and support).

All the work to care for animals falls to volunteers who already have high levels of stress from the fires (plus many have full time jobs, families etc as well) and are caring for injured animals on top of the work they do around road kill orphans (increased due to fires). There is no supporting infrastructure on the Central Plateau, as there is in other regions eg no dedicated building with humidicribs, cages etc, so many end up doing the rehabilitation inside their own homes. One of the Group (an accredited carer) has 8 orphaned wombats in cages in her living room and care for these will need to go on for months, requiring 3 people helping.

There is also no obvious process to facilitate community involvement. Her Group was set up privately and it would help if, after a fire, a process was in place to assist volunteers and volunteer groups and people to come forward, but without burdening them with onerous bureaucracy.

Ms Lewis (who also has a postgraduate degree in forestry) also flew over the Huon Region on her return flight from the Central Plateau and was shocked with what she saw. She has grave concerns for the sustainability of timber resources in the area with many young coupes burnt. This will create significant holes in the supply of timber for decades. There have been no statements about this which she believes is extraordinary. Forestry is a significant industry and the fire’s economic and social impact also needs to be assessed.

Ms Lewis commended all the firefighters.