

SUBMISSION TO CONSTEDT REVIEW OF THE MANAGEMENT OF BUSHFIRES DURING THE 2018-2019 SEASON

Evidence and Comment from an Evacuee

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I authorise disclosure of my name.

Dear Sir or Madam

As a resident and ratepayer of Lonnvale, I write to you on behalf of my wife and I who are 62 and 75 respectively. We had sound reasons to evacuate from our home with the impending fires just over the hill around Southwood and Denison; combined with at times intensive smoke. We evacuated to the Huonville PCYC evacuation centre for 11 days along with our two dogs. Our house cow and cat remained at our address.

I wish to acknowledge the excellent arrangements put in place by the Huon Valley Council and the tremendous support of their staff, executive staff, the Councillors who were involved, and the many volunteers. We did not realise how traumatised we were until we were able to consolidate and reflect on our personal concerns in what felt like a very safe environment.

My comments enclosed are based on our firsthand experience of being in the PCYC Evacuation centre and whilst my comments could be perceived as hearsay, they do reflect first person interactions between myself and others, myself and TFS and other authorities, and are my personal observations. I was much immersed in the crisis and had no other distractions other than the fires and their impact on us both.

I am also referring to people and places by names, for no other reason than that of transparency.

I am not condemning or intentionally exposing. I am simply relating what occurred, who I spoke with and most importantly, I have no political motivation other than offering my statements for the benefit of this important inquiry.

At the outset I do wish to advise our trauma continues to this day. This was noted when a recent fire a couple of weeks ago in our area, along with helicopter activity, caused increased anxiety.

I attended the State Government run event on Trauma at the Huonville Scout Hall and found it to be most enlightening and liberating, and I extend thanks.

Sadly during our evacuation I received a significant amount of Facebook abuse because of posts made by two well known large business leaders in our community.

The comment below regards staying and defending, and another from a major local Aquaculture employer who posted a vile and mischievous post about me which incited considerable hatred and abuse against my wife and I, and which continues to this day.

This had a devastating impact on our health and wellbeing and whilst not a part of this inquiry, it is perhaps a sign of the way people behave in times of a crisis. In this case a failure by these people to recognise we are all in this together.

The online abuse also included a threat on my life from the husband of the current Deputy Mayor (which has been filed with the Police), two abuses from current sitting Councillors (reported as a Councillor Code of Conduct complaint to LGAT), and numerous other sickening and disturbing comments from people.

We know some of these people who had no issue with serving me abuse online, some are neighbours, many are supporters of the local Aquaculture hatchery situated alongside the Russell River, and many are from the “old guard” that is alive and well in this Valley.

We are still regarded as “blow ins” from the “mainland” having only been in the Valley for 10+ years.

One of these vile posts related to our decision to leave and seek shelter rather than staying and attempting to fight any fire. This provoked agreement from many in our community along with comments we should not be “bludging off the taxpayer for three meals a day”.

I feel it necessary for the public record to advise my wife is a chronic asthmatic; I have a disabled knee; and I do not consider ourselves to be fit and able to fight a fire. Our property was/is well prepared for fire complete with two dedicated fire tanks, a petrol powered fire pump, and an unlimited supply of water from the Russell River which borders our property.

We were however not prepared to risk our lives for the sake of our real estate, and would have no hesitation in doing exactly the same in the future.



Responses to the Terms of Reference

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

There was much discussion and even anger expressed by many of the evacuees staying within the evacuation centre around the delays in attending to the initial fire which was said to be in the vicinity of the Tahune Airwalk.

Blame was rightly or wrongly apportioned to the Greens, to STT, and to TFS.

It is my view this is a question that requires complete transparency and a response to the community. Social media has been alive with criticism of the failure to act sooner rather than later.

There have also been suggestions that our State Government was complicit in allowing the fires to extend into the wilderness areas, an area in which there was no apparent interest to protect, and for the reason of gaining Federal funding once there had been a specific spread of fire in terms of square hectares. Is this correct?

2 The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

Being in the evacuation centre was akin to being in the centre of the action in terms of updates, messages and warnings.

The at first, twice daily TFS briefings, and then once a day briefings by TFS, Police and Council were extremely important and became the next priority in the day, in between cups of tea, resting and waiting for the possible inevitable.

TFS Station Manager Phil Douglas was an exceptional front person at these briefings. He was direct, pulled no punches and he was highly believable. He also spoke from what appeared to be considerable firsthand experience.

He was honest and forthright which is what the evacuees were wanting.

Unfortunately Phil Douglas was not always the front person, apparently due to other duties after the first few days. It was then very noticeable that when others from TFS took this lead role, the quality of the communications deteriorated considerably. For some reason Phil Douglas did not return to his initial role and importance in the local briefings.

When the role changed, it was very noticeable:

- The same, almost to the word, message was repeated and were no more informing than the regular 15 minute ABC radio updates.
- The detail was greatly lacking.
- There was an element of not knowing about a crisis of this nature.
- The urgency and possible real time threats were downplayed considerably.
- There appeared to be a message from “above” that was guiding the communication and it was the view of many in the evacuation centre, this was a State Government controlled aspect of the disaster to avoid any panic, to lessen the reality of what was actually happening at the fire front, and most importantly to limit the disaster the fires were having on tourism to the Valley. The same thinking was being applied to our local Mayor and General Manager. Were they being directed by our Government?
- I personally attended just about every briefing over our 11 day stay at the PCYC. The initial meetings, as one would expect, were filled to capacity and there were lots of questions. As the days went on the audience lessened considerably and there was a suggestion from TFS personnel it was information fatigue and possible overload.
- My view, and that of many, was the meetings lost their power and relevance. The information was being strongly downplayed. The charts being shown of the fire areas were poor. The up datedness of the data being presented was becoming questionable and out of date (by hours). The “show and tell” was becoming the same as the earlier presentation so people chose not to bother attending. A dangerous complacency set in.

My reason for making these comments is based on the real time data we evacuees were collecting as a body of interested people from many friends and relatives who had chosen not to evacuate. Social media was running hot. Videos and pictures of the fire front were circulating. There were comments from some who remained to defend their property that the PCYC was a “panic centre”, but this could not be further from the truth.

Our experience was one of calm because we were aware of the reality. This I believe is an extremely important lesson to this inquiry. We are now in an evolving world of social media. We are well connected to each other via the internet and there is nothing more honest than a photo or a video captured and shared within minutes of it being taken, from people you know.

It was not being “stirred up” by Facebook trolls as one TFS person said to me.

This should not be construed as bad; as was openly suggested several times by the TFS personnel. TFS were not providing (or perhaps even able to) the same commentary, they were not delivering the same up to date information, and therefore, in my view, were hardening against social media and calling it out for being scaremongering or even being incorrect and false information.

The lesson going forward is that TFS and any other authorities involved in any future disasters have no excuse or reason NOT to provide 24/7 real time communication to the internet audience. I can fully appreciate there may be good reason not to alarm people, but we must no longer take the view that people are fools, or are incapable of handling the reality. Information is powerful and we must allow citizens the right to make their own assessment based on credible information at hand.

A tough task for TFS et al, but a most important communication priority going forward. I do accept that the people who might drive such social media communication also need to be decision makers with the ability and the authority to make real time decisions; and to be able to openly communicate without first obtaining permission from a complex chain of command,

The other alarming concern was the severe lack of almost any communications or coverage coming out of mainstream media.

We were advised mainstream media were not allowed to film in the PCYC for privacy reasons, to protect those evacuees residing in the centre. Word came back however that the mainstream media were being blocked from reporting in order to dampen the message of a disaster in the making. I was personally advised by a journalist they were being blocked by the authorities.

I personally took this message to one of the meetings as a question and within the next 12 hours there was a media presence. It was said to me by a TFS person “are you happy now, we have the media here today!”. I was already suffering trauma so just took that comment with a grain of salt.

As the fires progressed it was rapidly becoming evident the message of our impending and actual fire disaster was not getting to the outside world. It was certainly not reaching friends and family in Queensland, NSW and WA. And it was not even reaching Hobartians. On a visit I made to Hobart about 6 days into our evacuation period, I spoke with six different shop personnel (various ages) and without exception they all thought the fires were under control, and after some very light rainfall at another time, they thought the fires had been extinguished.

Why the message was not front line news is a quandary and a concern. When the floods happened in Queensland, the media coverage Australia wide was considerable by comparison. This was very noticeable.

Again I repeat the very real growing suspicion that our State Government was in damage control to save the normal time of year tourist business and wanting everything back to normal as soon as possible.

The Wooden Boat Festival was also imminent which brings thousands to Tasmania and as far down as Franklin where of course roads were blocked. It appeared a good many decisions we also based around this impending event.

The end result was very little Federal attention until very late in the piece. This meant very poor empathy with anyone or business outside of the Valley, and a resulted in a sense of hopelessness for the residents being impacted.

And of course, there was no Army presence brought in. The reason provided by TFS was that our Tasmanian military are not trained in fire fighting. They would however have been highly suitable as security, manning closed roads and assisting in evacuating people – rather than having to call on Police resources.

It was the view of many that this meant too little effort was happening in the early days and that our local authorities were either being directed by Government, or were themselves ego driven in believing “we can manage this without any external assistance”.

This same position, was in my view, being adopted by our Huon Valley Council in respect to the briefing presentations. The first series of briefings were poorly presented in terms of audio and later webcasting. I attempted to bring this issue to the General Manager and was publicly put in my place. I would told quite emphatically “we are doing the best we can Mr Swan with the resources we have at our disposal.”

I later learned of a local audio visual technician, who has all the necessary equipment and years of experience, had offered his assistance and it was not accepted. The HVC attempted to manage an out of the ordinary process of audio visual using their own internal staff.

I later wrote an email to HVC management and our Mayor requesting intervention from someone who understands audio and webcasting for a large audience. It took several days before a person from Kingborough Council was brought in to take control of the webcasting, and finally it was all as it should have been from day one or two.

A time of emergency is not a time to be precious about what a Council in this case, can manage with their own resources. The key need was communication and in my view it was severally impeded in the initial days because of possible ego or maybe financial.

Once the webcasting was up and running successfully this was a most important element for all the Valley, friends and family on the mainland, and the rest of Tasmania, to keep abreast of the latest briefings – particularly since mainstream media was failing miserably with anything more than a passing commentary, or nothing at all.

An important note regarding webcasting is that it really only needs to be audio.

Video was adding more complications and all people really wanted was to “hear” what was happening with up to the minute knowledge. A talking head on screen was immaterial.

As the days progressed there appeared to be an emphasis placed on downplaying the reality of the disaster upon us. Even the prospect of the fire coming over the Glen Huon range to ultimately impact Huonville town and the PCYC was mentioned in passing, but with no real emphasis of a real possibility. Assurances were provided suggesting everything is in control, but ultimately these messages were being diluted when they were proven to be incorrect or dated.

The status updates of the fires and comments that the fires were under control were emphasised, when many knew full well there were a multitude of factors impacting each and every fire that we beyond the control of the fire fighters.

When I questioned TFS management about this, I was advised the strategy is to minimise panic, portray that everything is in control and that everything possible was being done to ensure safety of life.

Again as days moved it became evident the TFS alerts were not changing. The same message would appear in updates a few hours later with not a single change, despite on occasion hearing differently from the briefings, and friends and contacts who were at the fire front. Some alerts were lowered when in fact there was still a real and present danger should the winds or the weather conditions change.

When I questioned TFS management on this, I was advised this is a strategy to let people relax and calm down. Then, when it is truly urgent and we change the alert back up again, then people will more readily respond to the call to action. Even now after the fire crisis is over and my stress and trauma levels are closer to normal again, this strategy I feel needs review.

This was the same comment made by TFS when I questioned why people were allowed to return to their homes whilst there were still high alerts in their vicinity. I was assured this was to allow people to “settle down” and then they would react promptly should the situation change. This may be an approved model, but as an evacuee it did not inspire confidence.

As mentioned earlier, our community these days are well connected, in particular with social media be it Facebook, email or simply mobile phone. We are now more than ever wanting information which we can personally process, and in turn, individually decide its impact on us, our loved ones or our neighbours.

I believe the lack of credible and real time information is prone to causing more panic and even conjecture, rather than if the “cards are laid on the table”, such as Phil Douglas was able to do in the early days of the crisis.

There was also much confusion over the fire danger warnings with ultimate confusion over the Total Fire Ban days. As an evacuee it appeared incomprehensible that there were not Total Fire Bans in place in areas where there was a fire front a mere few kilometres away.

I have since gathered the reason is apparently so that “business as usual” can proceed without any legal ramifications. Operations such as using farm machinery could continue. It is my view this is a serious communication matter and concept that requires attention going forward.

An example close to home was the ongoing harvesting activities of Forico on plantations a mere 2 km from our property, and even closer to our neighbours property. Even on Total Fire Ban days Forico continued to harvest with machinery, load and transport logs on trucks on a narrow one way in/out road when there was fire over the Denison Ridge.

When I spoke with Forico management, who were very cordial and happy to engage, their response was they are exempt from the normal conditions of a Total Fire Ban and as long as they check the TFS website and monitor the weather every few hours, they are allowed to legally continue their harvesting and trucking.

Through my continued checking in with management we did get to a point where they agreed they would cease all operations at 11.00am on a high temperature day, and would leave a worker on site for another two hours to observe and monitor any possible fire ignition on their site.

The other vitally important issue was radio updates.

The ABC radio was vital to many of us. Some did not have internet access or could not access. However, ABC radio is not well received in many areas of the Valley and even the new DAB is not available. A car radio was one option for many as portable radios often fail.

There were times however when a sports broadcast meant there were no updates.

It is a suggestion that a radio signal is imperative. Perhaps use can be made of the existing HuonFM broadcasting station in any future emergency events.

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

Whilst much good effort was put in place to save such facilities as Tahune Air Walk and Southwood Mill, and the very important Centurion Tree... the sad loss of so much Wilderness area is a truly devastating outcome of these fires. The loss of Churchill's Hut is also a great tragedy.

After attending *Tasmania Burning: Lessons from the global bushfire crisis*, it was evident there are many aspects of firefighting tactics being employed in other parts of the world that need serious consideration here in Australia and Tasmania.

Two of the most pertinent messages, in my view, based on US experience were:

1. No matter how much resource and technology is applied to a bushfire once it is underway, the money spent pales when compared to the impact fire prevention can have for much less expenditure. This comment is based on the fact the US have the resources of military who are also highly skilled in firefighting, almost unlimited water bombing aircraft and unimaginable funds compared to Australia.. and yet they are still not on top of the fire fighting effort in the United States.
2. In contrast, examples were shown where an investment of \$100,000 per year over a 10 year period, in fire prevention, can result in a saving of 100's of millions of dollars.
3. Highly important to Tasmania and our Huon Valley, is the monoculture plantations which surround our communities. The e-niten and pine plantations are potential fire bombs due to close planting, wind rows and large amounts of undergrowth. And their proximity to people's homes is a matter of great concern and needs closer Government intervention, Local and State.

In the US for example, it is noted the foresters protect their investment by regular pruning of limbs, clearing of undergrowth and better tree planting spacing.

It was also noted how assets such as historic buildings, and highly important trees are protected through the use of fire blankets and automatic sprinkler systems installed into the forest areas.

4. Of concern and to be questioned are the fires that burned Southwood Mill and Ta Ann. A mere stone's throw across the river is some 600 acres of private land complete with dwellings. Thus property was completely burned and dwellings and household effects were destroyed and lost in the fire. Given the amount of resource both on ground and in air, the question needs to be asked, why action wasn't taken to at least preserve the private dwellings on this persons land when one or two buckets may have prevented his disaster.

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

During our time in the PCYC Evacuation centre we met three individuals who were either ex and/or still current employees at the time of Ta Ann and Southwood.

Their message was the same. Ta Ann and Southwood was a fire disaster in the waiting.

- They spoke of excessive debris and waste all around the site and around the infrastructure.
- Extremely heavy layers of sawdust deposited over the machinery.
- Gutters filled with sawdust.
- No consideration given to a future fire disaster.

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 NGOs.

I offer the following case study.

Our residence and 5 acre property is some 2km downstream of the very popular and well-appointed Rivers Edge Caravan and Camping ground situated alongside the Russell River in Lonnvale.

Our initial decision and ultimately forced evacuation (after we had already evacuated), was based on the proximity of the fires over the Denison Ridge (Southwood) and the at times intense smoke that enveloped our house. We left the evacuation to the last possible moment and the day we drove out along Lonnvale Road we passed several caravans and trailers heading through the smoke on route to the Rivers Edge Camping ground for the Australia Day long weekend.

At the time it was headlights on to traverse through the smoke and it was totally unbelievable that patrons would drive through smoke and fire on a dead end road and to pretend everything was normal.

We later learned the Rivers Edge FB page was advising there was no smoke, the skies were blue and encouraging visitors to come on out to Lonnvale. The smoke free moments may of course been the case just 2km up the road, but it certainly was not the situation in the rest of Lonnvale and even Judbury at times.

Over the next couple of days I became increasingly concerned about the camping ground for four reasons.

1. During such long weekends they fill to capacity with some 450 patrons
2. Australia Day celebrations generally includes a generous consumption of alcohol
3. The road in and out is only Lonnvale Road then through Judbury. As we were watching the progress of the fire it was becoming more and more evident they could well be trapped at the end of Lonnvale road if the worst happened
4. If our house and property, and our neighbours were seriously threatened, then access by emergency vehicles and fire trucks could be seriously impeded by campers and caravans deciding to exit the camping ground in the opposite direction at the last minute

I spoke with TFS management about the above concerns and was advised they are in daily phone contact with Rivers Edge and all was in hand.

On the Sunday I travelled out to Judbury and spoke with some local firefighters at the Upper Huon Station and learned their team had twice driven out the Rivers Edge – the Friday and the Saturday; and they had issued Rivers Edge with an evacuation request.

According to the local firefighters they were told all was OK, they were in contact with TFS management, and not to come out and bother them again.

Later that day I relayed this message to TFS management, was again assured they had it in control, and the comment was made to me that “local volunteer brigades are often too emotionally connected to their local area”.

Later that day I was advised by TFS that the people at Rivers Edge were being evacuated after a phone call from Phil Douglas requiring them to evacuate.

5 Any other matter that the Review team identifies in the course of its activities as warranting consideration

Perhaps the most important issue is **Climate Change**.

Why is this not a Terms of Reference item?

It has been widely reported and acknowledged our wilderness and forests are drier than ever before. Even our button grass is drier and more combustible than ever before.

It has been reported the number of dry lightning strikes is thousands more than usual.

We are in a Climate Change Emergency and for as long as our State Government and our Local Councils refuse to accept and adopt this as a matter of emergency, all the resources and money being thrown at combatting future bushfires in this State will be meaningless.

We must plan now for the impacts of Climate Change. We can no longer continue business as usual. We can no longer continue with the current Forestry model. We cannot continue the current views of our wilderness and we cannot continue with the previously failed Managed Investment Schemes put in place for on mass monoculture species plantation planting.

The issues of monoculture must be immediately addressed.

The immediate issue, and one espoused by TFS, is that now we have had such a major bushfire the risk of a repeat is now a good few years away if not more. Whilst this is a “feel good” message for here and now, it can also lead to complacency and ultimately a future disaster.

We must keep fires and there potential to destroy top of mind from this point onward. And fires and dry lightning strikes and reduction in water levels all go hand in hand with Climate Change.

A final comment is water resources.

Alerts were being broadcast about the rapidly decreasing water levels in the Geeveston community. It was explained by TFS that is was due to the inability of the water filtration system in Glen Huon to keep up with the demand for water in Geeveston. People were being urged to minimise their water use.

This suggests an issue of supply. Is there now a need for a large water containment plant nearer each community that is not filtered water. Fighting fires only requires raw water.

The other observation we made in the PCYC, was a number of evacuees had evacuated but had left their sprinklers going 24/7 and were hopeful there would be compensation for their water bill.

One situation was where a person had evacuated and deliberately turn off their sprinkler, only to find their “thoughtful” neighbour had turned it back on for them.

Ends