

**From:** gerald Crawford1 gerald Crawford1  
**Sent:** Sunday, 28 April 2019 7:15 PM  
**To:** AFAC Review (DPFEM)  
**Subject:** Tasmanian Bushfires 2018/2019

AFAC Review Committee,

My name is Gerald Crawford and I was employed by the Rural Fires Board of Tasmania and then upon the amalgamation in 1979 with the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS).

My employment began in 1972 and ceased in 2017 upon my retirement. My career was mainly spent in Field Operations with some 4 years as a Training Officer and Deputy Chief Training Officer in the early 1980's. My role in Field Operations began fighting fires and constructing and maintaining the vast trail system that was set up after the 1967 bush fires as well as a heavy emphasis on Fuel Reduction. In my career from 1985 I was a District Officer looking after a District which entails all facets of fire operations.

When the Fuel Reduction Unit was set up after the fires of 2014 I was transferred to that unit to help set it up and assimilate it into the Tasmania Fire Service. I spent two years there before retiring.

I have been involved in bushfires in New South Wales in 1977, 1994 and 2002 in Victoria in 2009, in the USA in 2000 and 2006. As well I have been involved in hundreds of fires throughout my career in Tasmania.

I have been a firefighter, Sector Commander, Strike Team Leader, Operations Officer (Level 3) and Incident Commander.

I have no formal qualifications in Fire except over 60 years of practical experience which started when I was a young boy on the family farm.

In this submission I will cover some areas more than others depending on what I see the issues are.

Causes of the Fires.

From my understanding most, if not all of these fires were the result of lightning strikes. This was the same scenario as in the fires of 2016. Over the last decade there appears to be more lightning strike fires than 40 years ago when in most cases there was follow up rain. If this is to be the "norm" for vegetation fires, then there will need to be radical changes in the way TFS and the other firefighting agencies conduct their business.

During the critical fire danger period after each Lightning event there must be action taken to establish where the location of any starts are. This reconnaissance period needs to continue for some time because not all lightning strikes produce fires straight away. It can be several days later when they take off.

Once the location of any starts are known then someone needs to make an assessment as to which fires will need to be fought. The criteria for this assessment is already in existence. It probably needs to be more formalised than what it currently is so that everyone knows and understands the reasons for or against which fire is fought or left.

Recommendations:

Protocols be drawn up between the three fire fighting agencies to cover the actions and events as regards lightning storms during the summer months.

Assessment Criteria for Lightning Strikes be formulated and all critical staff made aware of them and interagency training be provided for such.

The Chief Officer, TFS, have the ultimate power on which ones are fought and which ones are left.

## Community Warnings

In today's world everyone wants to know where and what is happening in real time. In an emergency situation that is not always possible. People within the affected areas need to take more account of what their own situation is because the official view is not always the one current for their own situation.

Community Warnings need to be current, with correct information and relevant for the correct area.

There was a bushfire at Dolphin Sands on the 10th April 2019 and if you looked at the TFS Alerts page there was conflicting information. The Emergency Warning said leave or you will die etc. whereas the Smoke Alert said that there was a bushfire burning at Dolphin Sands and there was no threat to communities. Very confusing for people who do not understand fire.

They, Community Warnings, are here to stay and we need to keep the community informed but it must be correct and relevant. Good intelligence must be sourced from the fireground before they are sent out.

IMT's must ensure that they get that intelligence from experienced personnel on the fireground.

## Recommendations:

Experienced Intelligence Officers be tasked to provide the information to the IMT's. These people must work from the fire area, not inside the IMT location.

More checks and balances between the different types of warnings, don't confuse the public.

## Response

The response to these type of incidents, Lightning Strikes, needs to be reflected by the initial assessment. There will be some areas where it can be deemed to not commit resources whereas in other more critical areas a heavy weight of initial attack should be commenced as soon as possible.

The type and weight of Response is very emotive with a lot of people and organisations. The TFS has some 5000 volunteers on its books but in reality there is probably only 50% of those able to man the trucks. None of them are Remote Area Trained (RAT) and in my experience there would only be a handful of those that would be able to fill that role. The RAT role has always been a career role for a variety of good reasons.

One line of thinking is that there be dedicated RAT personnel available to respond at all times. It certainly has merit but could be very problematic. I know there will be a United Firefighters Union (UFU) submission covering this area so I will leave it at that.

#### Recommendations:

Once the incident has been assessed as needing a response then that response must have sufficient weight of resources to make an effective response viable, particularly where the area is remote from backup resources.

The number of active TFS Volunteers is of concern and a problem that is not easily solved. Generally the number of volunteers in a brigade reduce in number the further you get from the major population areas. This is not a sole Tasmanian problem.

Brigades need to be assessed as to what standard of cover they are to provide, this may help some of the smaller brigades in retaining numbers.

The last resort is to amalgamate brigades. Over my time I have witnessed this and it is always an acrimonious time for all concerned and in the long run you end up with less brigade numbers.

#### Fuel Reduction

I have been involved in Fuel Reduction for over 60 years.

Fuel Reduction is one of the key components in mitigating the fire hazard that Tasmania has, and has the rest of Australia. But, to rely solely on Fuel Reduction as the panacea for protecting Tasmania is a falsehood.

The Fuel Reduction Unit, administered by the TFS, was set up after the Dunalley fires of 2013. It is doing some valuable work but is hamstrung by various issues, some of which are beyond its control. Since its inception there appears to be a perception by the public that they, TFS, will do all burning and there is no need for property owners to do any.

The amount of paperwork and notifications that has to be done tends to slow the process down. Burning in Autumn is seen as the most suitable time to burn but with the amount of viticulture dotted around the country side and more going in each year it limits the amount of burning that can be done. The science has been done on smoke taint but the agency tends to play safe and consequently burning opportunities become restricted.

As regards the fires in the South West I would like to say this. In my experience in this type of country, unless the area is and has been in serious drought conditions then most of the fires burn through the buttongrass and are pulled up once the fire hits the forested area. If you look at photos of these fires you will see what I am talking about.

#### Recommendations:

The \$1,000,000 given to Sustainable Timber Tasmania, supposedly to reduce fire hazards be left in the Fuel Reduction Unit Budget and given to Parks and Wildlife to help manage their considerable fuel problem.

More burning be done in Spring and at other times when conditions are suitable.

Aerial Fuel Reduction be carried out on a larger basis than it currently is particularly in the South West. If the plains can be burnt then the risk to some of the critical Montane areas will be reduced.

Less money spent on so called research.Surely over the last 50 years there has been that much research done on fires,in all sorts of vegetation,that the Papers,Books,Thesis etc would fill several book cases.We need action not research.

#### Interstate/International Assistance

I have worked with these people on lots of fires and in general are very proficient in what they do.Without their assistance the TFS would not be able to maintain crews on the ground during prolonged operations.

#### Recommendations:

Ensure that IMT's are a composite of local and interstate/overseas personnel.Maintain the local knowledge

#### Aviation

I was one of the people who many years ago started using Helicopters on fires in Tasmania.They were used for Reconnaissance,Mapping,Fire Crew transport and Bucket work.As the years have progressed the amount and type of aircraft have increased significantly.

The public expect, and politicians imply, that we must use whatever number and type of aircraft available to put the fire out.Cost is not an issue!The Feds will pay for it!

Aircraft are but another piece of weaponry in the firefighters arsenal and I would have to say that in lots of cases they are not being used correctly.

Aircraft do not put out fires,they contain them.Firefighters on the ground put fires out.The two must be used together to achieve a successful result.

#### Recommendations:

Aircraft are very expensive and there is a lot of aircraft usage on fires that is unnecessary.More training to staff about the correct way to use aircraft.

Public campaign about correct aircraft use on fires,it may look good but it is costly ,wasteful and potentially dangerous.

Aircraft ,rotary and fixed ,to be tasked appropriately.

#### General

The amalgamation of the two fire services in 1979 has to be seen ,in general a success.This success has come at the expense of having good well experienced bush fire fighters/tactians.

These people came from the Rural Fires Board. Their main role as Country Fire Officers was fighting and managing bushfires. There are now none of these people left at TFS.

The TFS does not have the people with long term experience in bushfire tactics. Tactics is not even taught anymore.

The current personnel do not have the skills to make good tactical decisions at the fire front, consequently every decision is made at IMT level where the bushfire experience, at a practical level is even less.

Experienced firefighters at the fire front see decisions, that in some cases are ludicrous, but have no power to overturn them because the decision and tactics has come from the IMT.

In summing up the need for more strategic fuel reduction is imperative. Climate change may be here, and there is probably nothing we can do in the short term. So, as always you go with what you have, no use looking for the silver bullet.

In every review, Royal Commission etc. since 1939 has highlighted the need for substantial fuel reduction. It is not easy to achieve this, particularly in Tasmania's weather but we must try.

Regards,

Gerald Crawford AFSM

District Officer(Rtd.)