

Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities

Council (AFAC).

Cronstedt review of the management of bushfires during the 2018-19 fire season.

I am making this submission to draw attention to the ridiculous and dangerous protocol made apparent during the recent fires where the major emergency response services (viz: TFS, Tasmania Police and SES) did not have access to a common data base.

This addresses clause 5 of the Terms of Reference:

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 am a permanent resident in the Central Highlands municipality of Tasmania. I live near the township of Miena.

My home was built in 2014 and complied with all building requirements, including the provision of a 10,000 litre dedicated fire-fighting tank with Storz hose coupling; requisite clearing of all vegetation to achieve a BAL 29 rating; and a passing bay in the driveway. The house is built from local dolerite stone. I live alone, and for the duration of the Great Pine Tier fire in January, I was the only resident on Barren Tier.

I have a petrol-motor-powered firefighting pump with 30 metres of firefighting hose; a hose connected to a bathroom tap inside the house; a 3kW off-rid solar power system and a backup generator should that fail.

There is a 1,000 litre IBC tank which can be moved around the cleared area with my tractor.

I have reliable mobile phone and NBN services.

Having experienced two fire threats at my previous residence in the Huon Valley I felt adequately prepared and confident to defend my property.

However, I believed that as the fire progressed towards my area I would get a visit from the Tasmania Fire Service - firstly to assess the "defendability" of my home and some assessment of my likely capability, and secondly to be aware that there was an owner staying to defend his property.

At no time did this happen, despite numerous TFS vehicles passing my driveway on Barren Plains Road. The Five Mile Pinnacle opposite me was the scene of a large back-burn which extended along the Shannon River, and had I not driven out and questioned a NSW firefighter about the activity I could hear, I would have been none the wiser when the area was lit. He did pass my details on to the incident controller, who phoned me later that night (January 22) to tell me what was planned.

The police visited me twice during the fires, on the first occasion (January 21) to advise me to leave; then after I said I was staying, taking my details and photographing me and my house. The policewoman phoned me back on the next day to see if I was OK – she'd noted it was my birthday. The second occasion was January 30, and the newly-appointed local officer was seeking information from me about any other occupants in the area.

At a community meeting in Miena on January 27 I queried a TFS officer about the lack of a visit. I was told "We don't have time to talk to everyone". I suggested as the only resident on Barren Tier I would have felt a lot more confident had the TFS checked out my property, equipment and capability, and was told all properties had received "a rapid assessment"(?). I was certain no one had visited, but a helicopter had flown low over my house, and I'd waved (happily) to it. Apparently that constituted an assessment. I suggested that the TFS had no idea who I was and where I lived, and he refuted this.

I then spoke to the police, who found me on their data base. This gave me some comfort until further questioning revealed that they did not and could not share this information with the other emergency services. I was incredulous.

This was confirmed on February 1 when I visited the Miena command centre to notify the authorities I was leaving my home for three days, as I considered the threat to my property had eased. A senior TFS officer stated apologetically "The left hand doesn't know what the right hand's doing".

With the IT resources available, a shared data base specific to a current natural disaster, containing information about residents, their properties and whether or not they are on site or have evacuated should be easy to establish. In an area like Miena, where the resident population can swell rapidly from 100 to 1,000 with the arrival of shack owners, this information is vital for public safety, and the efficient deployment of resources.

My second submission concerns clause 2:

The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

I only heard about two community information sessions from friends. Apparently these were announced on Facebook – not a service that I or many others use. I did send an email to the TFS suggesting announcements on the website and on ABC Radio would be more universally received. I noted (whether as a result of my comments) that this happened.

I appreciated the two text messages I received on occasions when Barren Tier was at Emergency Warning level.

My other suggestion is that the TFS provides links to two other government websites which I found invaluable in giving me a more accurate picture of the fires in my immediate vicinity. The public was being constantly reminded to “keep informed” and these certainly assisted me:

Sentinel Hotspots

<https://sentinel.ga.gov.au/#/>

My Fire Watch

<https://myfirewatch.landgate.wa.gov.au/>

There is always more to learn after the event, but I thank all the personnel who contributed to the massive effort which averted terrible disaster throughout much of Tasmania this summer.

Greg Pullen