

**From:** Liz Smith  
**Sent:** Thursday, 2 May 2019 5:31 PM  
**To:** AFAC Review (DPFEM) <AFAC.Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au>  
**Subject:** Submission for Review of bushfires 2019

Please find below and attached my submission on the bushfires and the effects on health and wellbeing in the Huon Valley and the concerns about the future extreme weather.

Yours sincerely,

Liz Smith

### **To the Review Panel for the AFAC Review**

**AFAC. [Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au](mailto:Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au)**

### **Huon Valley bushfire effects, especially in the Cygnet area – January – February 2019**

The bushfires that so badly affected the Huon Valley in early 2019 have had many and complex effects in the area. The fire conditions were unusual because there was so little wind that the fires were relatively slow-burning and generated a great deal of smoke.

When the fires started, due to unprecedented dry lightning strikes throughout southern Tasmania, it would seem that many of the small fires that started were not attacked immediately. For fires that were relatively close to human habitation (Riveaux Road and Gell River), immediate attack either from the air or from the ground where roads were close by – as apparently in the case of the Riveaux Road fire – could have meant that the subsequent emergency situation would easily have been avoided.

- Will the panel fully investigate the circumstances of the early phases of the fires and why it was not possible to extinguish them within a few days?

It was fortunate that the weather was relatively calm and cool because if high winds and hot weather had followed the dry lightning strikes the results would probably have been catastrophic. However, the unusual conditions resulted in slow-moving fires and the generation of large amounts of smoke at low levels.

As a Cygnet resident I would like to comment on the effects locally. The fires were relatively far away, but, because of the dense smoke, there was a great deal of apprehension, and residents feared that the fire would be driven quickly across the Huon River and towards the township of Cygnet if the wind increased. Memories of the '67 fires were constantly referred to.

The local volunteer fire brigades patrolled the Cygnet Coast Road and ensured that spot fires were promptly dealt with. They are to be commended on the efforts that they made. However, it was not clear why they drove back and forward along the road rather than staying at a central place (possibly a high vantage point) where they could quickly reach spot fires to the north or south. I understand that a small fire at Petcheys Bay was extinguished very efficiently by local volunteers.

The reports on ABC 936 “your emergency station” were very repetitive and the time-frames expected for fire to reach places under extreme threat became difficult to follow because the time-frames of two to six hours often stayed the same over several hours.

- Was this the best way to inform residents of the fire danger?

One of the biggest problems, apart from the tension resulting from the intense smoke and lack of knowledge of how the fires might spread, was the density of the smoke that descended on the Cygnet valley. The smoke levels were dangerously high but the values were not reported on the radio and those who were unfamiliar with the consequences of smoke inhalation may have suffered medium and long term health effects.

Many people, especially the elderly and those with young children, left the area and it was encouraging that they were reimbursed by the government for the expenses they had incurred.

- Will the panel recommend that warnings be given on the local ABC about the levels of particles in the air in specific localities, and the health dangers of, for example, working outdoors in those conditions?

### **The bigger picture**

Recent reports that no grapes are to be harvested in the Huon and Channel region because of smoke contamination emphasise the damage that smoke can do. The destruction of large areas in the wilderness and especially the loss of beehives and of stands of leatherwood on which apiarists depend will be an ongoing cost to Huon Valley businesses if the bees that orchardists require for pollination have been destroyed. In addition there has been considerable loss of

wilderness areas due to the dry lightning strikes and the fires that were generated and not controlled due to the remote and inaccessible terrain.

- Perhaps more resources need to be directed to protecting wilderness areas so that the values for which the World Heritage area was listed are not further damaged?

The unpredictable nature of climate change, which now appears to be happening at an unexpectedly increasing rate, means that it is necessary to rethink how to manage natural landscapes, especially forests, to prevent fire from spreading. It is known that forests generate moisture in the air and that deciduous forest is more resistant to fire than pine or eucalypt. It may therefore be wise to plant deciduous forest close to human habitation and around native forests and plantations. The timber from such forests would be a valuable resource and the trees could reduce the damage done by fires in eucalypt forests and plantations.

- Will the panel investigate this possible approach to reducing the impacts of fire close to settled areas?

As so clearly described by John Fleming II in the Cygnet and Channel Classifieds of May 1, this year's fires are a portent of things to come. The review panel needs to make robust recommendations, especially on the actions that governments need to take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to respond to the climate change emergency that is unfolding around the world. Unprecedented fires, floods and high winds have caused havoc and death in many countries over the past few years, and unless urgent action is taken by governments, businesses and communities the situation can only get worse.

I thank the panel for this opportunity to make a submission and look forward to the comprehensive report, and especially to the recommendations made. I hope that the recommendations will be implemented as quickly as possible and that, through government support for the recommendations, there will be wide community support for measures that need to be put in place.

Yours sincerely,

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May 2 2019

