

Meander Valley Council Submission

Cronstedt Review of the Management of Bushfires during the 2018-19 Fire Season

Introduction

Meander Valley Council is located in the central north area of Tasmania.

It has a total land area of 3,821km² and population of 19,686. The population living west of the urban areas of Launceston is dispersed and located in a number of small settlements, rural lifestyle areas and agricultural holdings.

38% of land within the Meander Valley Council Local Government area is located within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). There is an interface boundary of approximately 235km. Excluding forestry lands, there are about 150 freehold titles in private ownership.

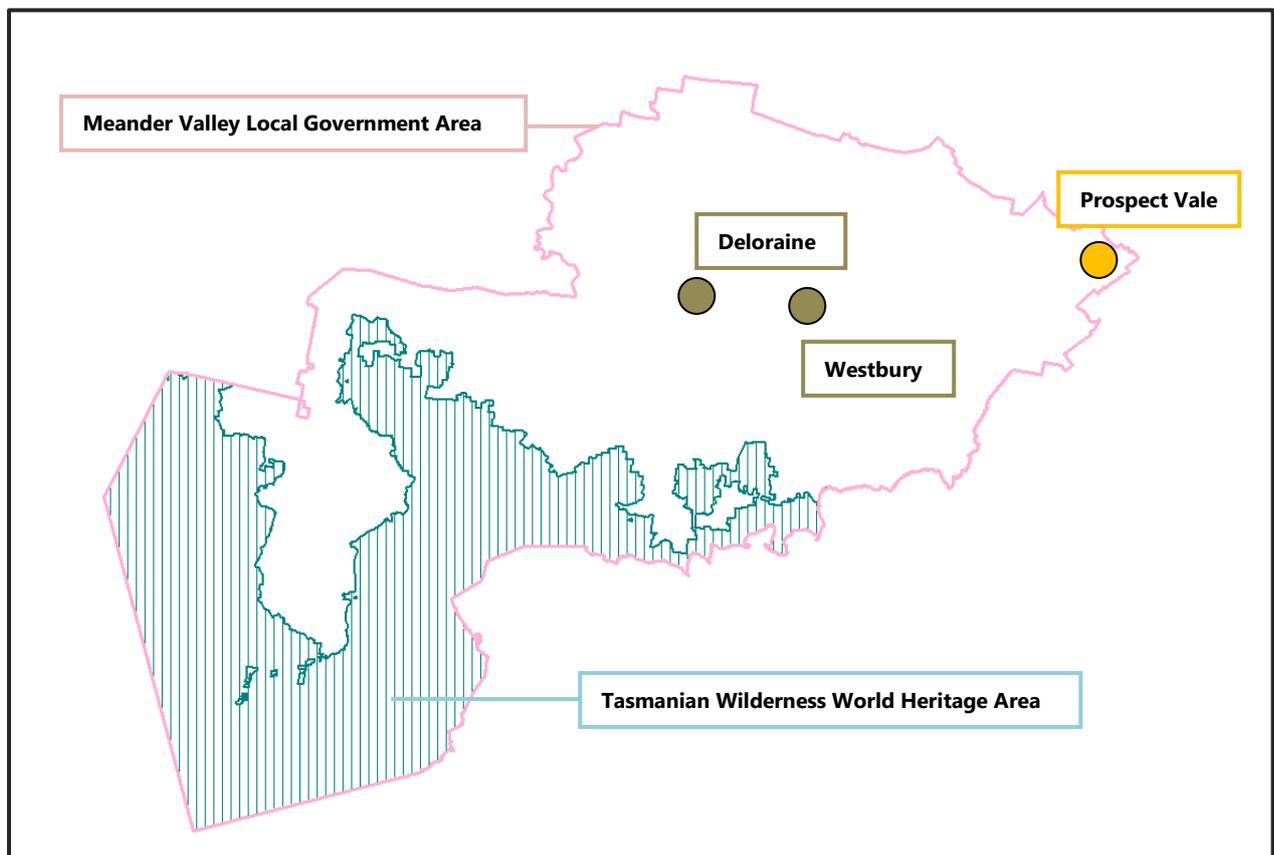


Figure 1. Meander Valley Council Local Government Area

At the Ordinary Council Meeting on 9 April 2019, Meander Valley Council (Council) made a unanimous decision to:

prepare a submission to the Independent Review into the 2018-19 bushfires and that the submission focuses on the impact and effectiveness of fuel management programs in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

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Terms of Reference

With respect to the Terms of Reference for the Cronstedt Review the submission by the Council is focused on the following term as it relates to the TWWHA:

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

Outline of Concerns

Spatial context

In the final report of the 2016 Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project, Dr Tony Press made the following conclusion:

This Report concludes that the risks of bushfire to the TWWHA will increase in coming years under the influence of climate change. It is likely that climatic conditions like those in 2016 will re-occur, and other aspects of fire risk will also increase. It is therefore important to take the lessons learned from the 2016 bushfires, and the climate projections referred to in this Report, to prepare for a future where fire management in the TWWHA is expected to be more challenging. The increase in bushfire risk has already started, and changes to management are needed now and well into the future.

Council notes that the findings of the report, while recognising the likelihood of increased fires within the TWWHA, do not consider the potential impacts of these fires once they cross the boundary.

This distinction between inside and outside the TWWHA is a key concern for Council.

Council would submit that any fire management practices within the TWWHA need to take into account risks posed to land holdings and assets located on land adjacent to the TWWHA.

Council would suggest that Cronstedt review recommends that in addition to planning to protect and conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the TWWHA, that Parks and Wildlife incorporate the risks to, and protection of, surrounding property into current and future fire management planning and implementation.

Fuel Load

Council notes that the increase of fuel loads in areas in the Central Highlands within the TWWHA has been caused by the change to land use and fire management practices.

These changes include the:

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- restriction of grazing
- cessation of seasonal burning by land manager

Meander Valley Councillors who whose families have lived and worked in the Central Highlands area for generations and who continue to visit and engage with the conservation areas note the physical changes in the area, especially with respect to biodiversity, vegetation density and fuel loading. One Councillor provided the following notes for inclusion in this submission:

Up until the 1970's the flora and fauna were kept in balance, by graziers, animal snarers and those living in the Highlands by undertaking cool spring burns, and prior to that the burns were conducted by the aboriginal people who successfully managed the land for many years with no legislation. Many of the areas traditionally burnt and grazed by cattlemen have now become overgrown invaded by undesirable species and are now a detonator for wild fire. It was this traditional management that resulted in an area so highly valued, that it was identified internationally to be worthy of protecting.

Fast forward 30 odd years, and the current situation sees us with proactive, controlled burns being stopped by Government Legislation, and the result in the Highlands, is that the original mixed species grasslands have now been overtaken by kerosene bush.

No one disputes the beauty and magnificent environment that we have, but to limit the management to the point where we end up with such significant changes to the land scape that what we once valued and deemed worth protecting is changing.

It is also creating a monoculture situation in the bushland with many of our forests in the same stage of not having been burned, which is decreasing the diversity of both flora and fauna. Many of our native species actually need fire to propagate, but an out of control, destructive summer fire is not the best way to achieve this.

Now, when a fire takes hold, it is very difficult to stop, and burns with such ferocity due to the fuel build up that it changes the landscape and the ecosystems that we once valued forever. The intention of protecting a valuable environmental asset is lost, due to lack of management.

What needs to happen, is the reintroduction of well-timed cool burns, where birds survive easily, fauna can escape, and microfauna can survive in the untouched damp areas. The result is a reduction in the fuel load so that a summer fire can be much more easily fought, and is less likely to take hold.

We are calling for the reintroduction of fuel reduction burns. There are many stakeholders who are capable of assessing when these are safe to conduct. Currently, the restrictions on

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burning are so stringent, and the requirements to do so are so rigorous, that by the time legislated requirements to burn are completed, the optimal environmental conditions are well gone, and the opportunity to burn safely is lost. Adjoining land owners must be empowered to do this, to protect their own properties that neighbour the TWWHA.

Another Councillor referred Council to a submission by the Australian Forest Growers (AFG) to the Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries in 2009. The key concern in the AFG submission was:

If fuel reduction burning does not occur, intense fires inevitably do, and this is a far worse situation in terms of threat to biodiversity, and ecosystems, not to mention human life and social and economic infrastructure.

The submission prepared 10 years ago refers to the '*cautious approach of prescribed burning by public authorities*', which the AFG says reflects the introduction of legislation such as the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

The premise of this submission by Council is based on similar concerns, and recognition that over the proceeding 10 years the fuel load in the TWWHA has continued to increase in as a result of the 'hands off' approach to bio-diversity conservation.

A copy of the AFG submission has been included as an appendix to this submission.

Conclusion

Council has formed the view that current fuel load management within the TWWHA is not effective and is:

- creating conditions that increase the intensity of fires and reduce the capacity to suppress them once they are ignited
- putting private property and life at risk in the areas abutting and adjacent to the TWWHA

Council is calling for a proactive fire management regime within the TWWHA that includes fuel reduction burns and equivalent support for landowners who own property adjacent to the TWWHA.

Council thanks the State Government for initiating the review and including the opportunity for public input. Council notes that this will be fourth review of bushfire events in Tasmania in the last 6 years, and recognises that on many levels there have been significant positive changes and improvements to processes, investment, education and response. The one thing, however, that has not been resolved through this period is the need for strong

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preventative measures especially in the areas of Tasmania that are subject to environmental and conservation protection.

If the review panel would like to follow any matter raised this submission please contact the General Manager of Meander Valley Council:

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