

SUBMISSION TO AFAC REVIEW OF THE MANAGEMENT OF BUSHFIRES DURING THE 2018-19 FIRE SEASON

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I am a full-time resident of the village of Miena, which was severely threatened by the Great Pine Tier fire but successfully defended with zero property damage. I have no experience or specialist knowledge in fighting bushfires, but do have experience and knowledge in some of the backroom activities that supported the firefighting effort, albeit in other settings. Most of my submission pertains to community interactions managed by the TFS for the Great Pine Tier fire event.

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

2. The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

Early warning

It was excellent that the TFS was able to recognise that Miena was at risk several days before the arrival of the fire front and organise a community meeting to help us prepare. Valuable information was disseminated at that community meeting about fire behaviour, and there was, as there should have been, a lot of focus on getting people to think through in advance how they would respond in an emergency to protect themselves.

In hindsight I feel that we could have been better prepared to look out for our fellow community members who were themselves less well prepared, as some who were not capable of defending their properties, did not have guaranteed escape routes, and probably didn't want to die did not evacuate when sensibility dictated that they should have done so. Pressure from their neighbours to evacuate might have helped convince them but we had all been told to focus on our own safety and there was never any mention of looking out for our neighbours. Miena isn't a long-established or tight community with a universal social network or any tradition of inclusive community leadership – most residents only live here during their active retired years and circulate only within limited social networks or may be new residents who hardly know anyone; some are reclusive; some are anti-social. It's normal here to rarely interact with, or even to avoid interacting with, one's nearest neighbours. As such we could have used a "cheat sheet" prior to the emergency in how to look out for each other, which would also have helped us figure out ahead of time who wanted to participate in looking out for each other and who didn't. The Bushfire Survival Plan document is excellent for helping households prepare as individual households but doesn't speak to responding to an event as a community.

Perhaps the Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program addresses the community aspects of preparation and response, but in a shack community with a highly seasonal population there is only so much that an off-season program can achieve.

Suggestions:

Sustain the practice of hastily organising meetings for communities at predicted risk.

Prepare, and distribute in communities at imminent risk, a brief document on things people in communities can do to help one another prepare for and survive an event, e.g. helping less able neighbours remove fuel, setting up "phone trees", identifying and checking on those whose ability to respond rationally in an emergency might be compromised.

Re-issue of an unchanged alert as if it is a fresh alert

A practice that I and others found irritating and exhausting over the course of a 3-4 week-long event is the re-issue of an unchanged alert dressed up as a fresh alert. Once we become aware of our current alert status we don't need to be continually and unnecessarily alarmed by new alerts when the actual alert status hasn't changed. This practice was particularly irritating and exhausting when relying on radio announcements during a period when a dozen or more alerts were being read in sequence; I sometimes lost concentration when the alert for my community was read. After 3-4 weeks of fatigue of this practice I stopped paying attention to some "new" alerts because I figured that there was almost certainly no new information.

Suggestions:

That new alerts only be issued when the information conveyed in them has changed from the previous alert.

Issue alerts in batches at the same time (e.g. 9.40 am) and have radio announcers preface emergency briefings with, say, the following text: "For the communities of x, y, z, your alert status is unchanged since 9.40 am" before going on to read all current alerts. That way listeners who are monitoring the radio continuously do not repeatedly waste energy waiting for and listening to every word of an alert they've already absorbed, while those who aren't aware of the current alert status still become informed.

Maps – time-stamping

I personally found the inclusion of a map of the fire ground in online alerts valuable, but its value was diluted by the lack of a time-stamp. In any developing situation the time at which information was current is a critical piece of knowledge. There were notable occasions when a particular area was obviously burning but the map attached to the freshly-upgraded alert was hopelessly out of date and showed the area as unaffected. In some cases misleading information can be worse than no information at all.

Suggestions:

Imprint a time-stamp on fire ground maps issued in online alerts.

Make available display of the, say, three previous maps so that users can see how the fire ground is developing (like the weather bureau does with its weather radar maps).

Dissemination of strategies during emergencies

Prior to this emergency I had had no previous direct exposure to the activities of the TFS. I had noticed that our local brigade volunteers tended to be residents of higher calibre and integrity, and had a lot of confidence in them, but that was it. I was, for example, completely unaware of how sophisticated modern bushfire-fighting actually is, that it's become a quantitative science where the power of a fire is calculated numerically and matched with the known capabilities of defensive assets.

As a mathematical modeller myself I know how much easier it is to allocate resources, and how much guesswork is eliminated, when a task has been adequately quantified, so I now understand why the firefighting effort was so effective. However, as a resident who had evacuated a home under threat and wasn't aware of what was going on in the backroom, the press conferences conducted by the TFS did nothing to assure me that the organisation was doing anything other than flying by the seat of its pants, and also starved the media of "hard" information that could have increased media exposure of the event and improved public trust in TFS operations. (The greater the public trust in the TFS the greater the number of people who will follow its advice and less difficulty emergency services will face with individuals who refuse to remove themselves from harm's way.)

A typical TFS press conference during the emergency phase consisted of a meteorologist speaking first and in considerable detail about forecast weather conditions, followed by the stark contrast of TFS personnel who didn't demonstrate knowledge of any details about how the fires were being fought, and mostly hopped uncomfortably from one foot to the other dodging questions like guilty politicians. A neutral observer would easily conclude that no details of how the fires were being fought were being shared because no such details existed, and that the TFS was an incompetent and politicised organisation making everything up as it went along. As a homeowner, watching these press conferences made me wonder if I should have stayed home to defend my property, even though I was ill-equipped to do so.

I now know that in reality there was detailed data collection feeding simulation modelling and that the power of the fires was being numerically forecast just like the weather, and that this information was being used to inform daily strategic planning for each fire ground that considered all likely contingencies and to allocate resources statewide with impressive precision. If this competency was conveyed during press conferences it would help residents feel calmer and more rational during the emergency phase, reducing stress and improving their decision-making, and give the media more stories to report that both make the TFS look like the professional results-oriented organisation that it clearly is, and feed the public's demand for hard information that reduces stress levels and would serve to make the public more compliant with TFS advice.

Suggestion: Have someone at TFS press conferences who can describe in some detail the day's operational strategies and contingencies, resources allocated (and the whys and why-nots), and risks (e.g. if wind speed/direction is different from forecast then high-risk situation x might develop). Have this person address the press conference for, say, two to three minutes per fire ground immediately following the meteorologist and be available for detailed questions from the media after senior emergency services personnel have spoken.

Information disseminated to remaining residents at local briefings not made available to those who evacuated

Local briefings were conducted in Miena for those residents who had remained despite advice to evacuate. The information shared at those meetings was not made available to those who had evacuated. As the evacuation period turned out to be extensive and uncertain, those of us who'd evacuated were hungry for information to help us plan our displaced lives in the short term, and there was considerable frustration and even resentment that those who had placed themselves and emergency services personnel at risk by not evacuating were being "rewarded" with what seemed to evacuees to be privileged information.

Suggestion: Make information shared at community briefings during the emergency phase accessible to evacuees.

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.

I would like to state that I am astonished at how few properties were lost or damaged in these fire events. I am familiar with a lot of the Riveaux Rd fire ground and it's one of the few areas I've explored thinking "gosh, being on one of these bush blocks would be a living nightmare in a bushfire".

Incorporation of local brigade knowledge

I have heard second-hand, through a friend who is close to some of our local brigade members, that members of local brigades both in Miena and elsewhere have felt frustrated that their local knowledge wasn't incorporated into centralised planning, and that local crews weren't given enough contextual information to recognise when significant undesired events occurred in the fire ground. The three examples I heard were:

1. That the erratic behaviour of fire in the Miena area is well known to the local brigade (it has a simple meteorological explanation as several weather systems collide in the area) yet managed to be a constant source of surprise to centralised managers and planners.
2. That new fire breaks were planned and constructed to contain the Lynch Hill fire on the west coast without consulting the local brigade about the location of recently existing fire breaks that were only metres away and could have been refreshed with less effort.
3. That a crew watched the Great Pine Tier fire breach a containment line (Marlborough Hwy) without recognising that anything was amiss.

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

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.

Inter-agency communications – road closures

There was an obvious and potentially consequential communications failure in road closure information published by Tasmania Police. As far as the TFS was concerned, during the emergency phase all roads into Miena were supposed to be closed to all but emergency services traffic, yet the Tasmania Police Community Alerts web page (the official source of road closure information) implied that access via Poatina was open to the public because it did not mention the route as closed. This resulted in an influx of people against the wishes of the TFS, and may also explain why the property next door to mine has minor damage from an attempted break-in (owner is unsure of the timing). The misinformation was only corrected after a resident who had remained in Miena to support emergency services personnel telephoned me to ask if I could distribute emails and social media posts telling people to stay away from Miena. When I informed her that official Police information was telling the public that the road was open she was able to tell the relevant TFS personnel, and the online information was corrected within minutes.

After the threat to Miena was reduced but the area remained on alert, access was re-opened to residents and property owners. However, this access status was not posted online by Tasmania Police for many days, leaving residents reliant on word-of-mouth (some of it conflicting). Again, the information was only corrected after TFS personnel were made aware of it.

Suggestion: Improve communications between the TFS and Tasmania Police regarding road closure status.

6.The effectiveness of the arrangements in place for requesting and managing interstate and international assistance and the significance of interstate and international assistance in managing the fires.

7.The use and effectiveness of aviation firefighting resources, in particular, the suitability of aircraft types for the protection of environmental values, forest assets and the rural/urban interface in Tasmania. (Note: this should also focus on the potential effectiveness of Winch capable aircraft as a first response).

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

9.The Review team will provide a means for members of the public and other interested parties to make submissions to the Review and will have regard to any submissions received in compiling its report