

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

Private Forests Tasmania submission.

Background.

Private Forests Tasmania (PFT) is a statutory authority established to promote, foster and assist the private forestry sector on forestry matters. PFT provides strategic and policy advice to Government on private forestry issues and represents Tasmanian private forestry owner's interests. PFT works with the Tasmanian private forestry sector and has over 1000 stakeholders that we interact with regularly. During the 2018-19 Tasmanian bushfires PFT provided government with information on the forest types and areas of private forest within the Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) burned area map, disseminated information on government support for fire effected areas, facilitated the provision of information and expertise needed to respond to the bushfires to landowners and is reimbursing the Private Forest Service Levy for fire effected areas in Forest Practices Plans (FPPs). PFT considers bushfire to be a major threat to the private forest resource and supports any effort to prevent or control bushfires. More about PFT can be found here: www.pft.tas.gov.au. Below is a summary of what PFT learned from its staff and stakeholders during the 2018-19 bushfire season relevant to the Cronstedt review, including some recommendations for consideration by the review team. PFT has responded only to Terms of Reference for which it has a meaningful feedback.

PFT is also aware that the Tasmanian Forests and Forest Products Network has prepared a submission which similarly addresses matters relevant to the private forestry sector. This submission complements the TFFPN submission.

Terms of Reference.

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

PFT is aware that actual events and those reported by stakeholders often contradict and that landowners often do not have all the facts or understand all circumstances, leading to misunderstandings and issues. With this in mind, and being aware that authorities involved with the firefighting activities dispute at least some of the following, PFT has summarised feedback from its stakeholders relevant to this term of reference.

PFT stakeholders reported that some fires were ignited by lightening in reserves which subsequently moved out of reserves to impact public and private forests and other privately and publically owned assets, including the Southwood mill facilities. Stakeholders report that privately owned assets, including people willing and able to fight fires and heavy equipment such as bulldozers made available to fight fires were assembled near the initial fires in reserves and were well placed to extinguish fires while they were small enough to readily control. Stakeholders reported that such a response was prevented by the reserve manager and/or TFS. Prevention included denying access to reserves, denying bulldozers the ability to drive over pavement (needing to be floated over pavement, requiring long delays) to access fires, and the prevention of privately managed fuel reduction burns ahead of the fire front. Stakeholders consider the prevention of private firefighting

efforts resulted in the Riveaux fire threatening communities, burning private and public production forest and the Southwood mill sites. In other regions stakeholders report the prevention of their firefighting activities resulted in the loss of privately owned forest and non-forest assets.

Recommendations:

- a) Commit to identifying and actioning on site firefighting methods to speed up first attack and more effective rapid control of fires in remote locations.
- b) Clarify, using transparent protocols shared by fire managers, methods for a more timely responses to firefighting strategies.
- c) Strengthen protocols for consultation with local experienced firefighters and improve mechanisms and transparent protocols for collaboration with landowners.
- d) That the TFS host public information and feedback sessions to improve communication on how the fires started and were responded to, including information on the work, health and safety requirements of people and equipment on the fire ground and the nature of fires in Tasmania that impact control measures implemented elsewhere (e.g. the difference in weather and fire ignition patterns effecting the ability to follow a fire front with firefighting aircraft and meaningfully respond to lightening ignitions in Victoria and Tasmania).

2. The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

PFT staff noted that community messaging was constant during the bushfires and appeared to be working well. The most effective forms of messaging were through ABC radio and news 24, the TFS website and through call outs by phone and door knocking by police and TFS. These efforts made through all these forms of media should be commended, encouraged and built on in the future.

On the negative side, some comments from stakeholders and staff related to the accuracy of some information on the TFS website. Apparent lags in updating the burn front impeded accurate reporting to government on damage to private and public forest assets and impeded accurate info to landowners in the fire path. Others indicated that different parts of the TFS website gave conflicting information on status (watch and act, vs 'fire going'), which caused unnecessary panic, evacuations and water usage.

Recommendations:

- a) Acknowledging the difficulties with smoke and local weather conditions impeding aerial reconnaissance, look for innovative methods to improve, where possible, the accuracy of the burned area on the TFS website.
- b) Ensure the TFS website contains consistent information.

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.

PFT stakeholders raised the same matters as summarised under ToR 1, which are not repeated here. In addition stakeholders reported that:

- Fire fighters from Victoria ask if dry lightning storms are going to be more prevalent can Tasmania adopt the Victorian model of immediately flying the storm path and bombing early fire spots with fire retardants.
- Excessive focus by fire authorities on protecting buildings (including low value outbuildings) over valuable forestry estates. Landowners report significant efforts to save relatively low

value buildings while valuable forest assets are not protected, in some cases against landowner's wishes.

- There appeared to be lack of collaboration from fire authorities in using landowner and forester knowledge of local areas/roads/access/assets etc., which may have been exacerbated by lack of a mechanism to engage with private landowners, e.g. with equipment and personnel. Also, coordination with property level fire management plans that include mapped access to water (dams and rivers via existing roads) and asset protection priorities. Some landowners propose a more formal mechanism for fire authorities to attain property fire management plans (e.g. leave in recognisable place such as metal drum, at property entrance). Firefighting may be further facilitated by the development and provision of more property level fire management plans being made available to fire authorities.

Recommendations

- a) Review the use of aircraft to follow the track of lightning storms with a view to enhancing i) rapid first response (e.g. with fire retardant) and locate and map fires with infra-red mapping and ii) better targeting of aerial deployment of experienced remote areas fire fighters.
- b) Review mechanisms for fire authorities' engagement with land managers to enable better utilisation property level fire-fighting plans, priorities of assets for protection from fire, and access to resources, including through the use of regional fire management plans (Developed in consultation with local land owners, TFS and public land managers).
- c) As per Recommendation 1e with an emphasis on timeliness and effectiveness of initial fire response.

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

Fire is a major risks to the private forestry sector. PFT commends fuel reduction burns and the capacity to conduct them, and supports any further investment. PFT notes and commends the Tasmanian governments coordinated program of fuel reduction burns across the State.

Recommendation:

- a) Improve cooperation with landowners to implement more effective and timely fuel reduction burning programs at the local level

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.

Engagement between fire authorities and landowners could be improved to better engage with landowner assets and to improve communication and develop a common understanding of roles and actions undertaken during firefighting.

Recommendations: As per Recommendation 1e.

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).

See Recommendation 3a.

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

Salvage operations

PFT believes there is a useful line of work in developing the capacity to identify and facilitate rapid salvage of burned forests. Salvage operations allow landowners a return on burned forests during the post fire recovery phase. This can support more general land-management actions such as road maintenance and these activities help support the forestry supply chain that is generally placed under pressure post fire – particularly given the reduction in harvestable forest area and forestry activities immediately post fire. Salvage of structural and appearance grade wood needs to occur quickly to avoid log quality downgrades. Salvage is not well developed in the Forest Practices Code risking unnecessary planning delays and costs. Salvage of downed wood can further support salvage activities and is also not well covered in the forest practices code. Salvage of downed wood could increase the area of cost effective salvage operations and will likely be a requirement for bioenergy harvests.

Recommendations:

- a) Develop methods to identify areas suited to salvage (e.g. aerial imagery of fire intensity and canopy characteristics with forest type and age).
- b) Enhance salvage provisions of the Forest Practices Code and/or associated planning tools for standing and downed wood to facilitate rapid planning and responses.
- c) Post fire support mechanisms and assistance measures of government to include mechanisms to facilitate salvage operations.

Assessment of fire damaged forests

The private forest resource in the TFS burnt area boundary was 35 643 ha. Assessing damage and appropriate land management responses to forests in this area will require a forester to visually assess areas at a cost to landowners.

Recommendation:

- d) Post fire support mechanisms and assistance measures of government to include mechanisms to enable properties to be assessed for fire damage and owners to appropriately respond.