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Dr Felicity Novy
AFAC Review Team
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Via email: AFAC.Review@dpfem.tas.gov.au

Dear Dr Novy

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the *AFAC Review of Operations for the 2018-19 Fire Season*.

Please find a submission from STT attached.

Any queries please don't hesitate to contact me via dean.sheehan@sttas.com.au

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Sheehan", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dean Sheehan
Manager, Fire Management
Sustainable Timber Tasmania





AFAC Review of Operations for the 2018-19 Fire Season

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

In difficult circumstances with challenging weather and sheer number and location of fires the response was undertaken in a measured and coordinated manner with response priority determined under the Tasmanian Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines. This was an effective and appropriate approach. However there appears to be a missing link between the TERAG assessment and implementation of firefighting priorities by the IMT. There is potential for consequences to be tasked at a different or competing priority than what they were assessed as under TERAG.

There is concern the true commercial value of forestry assets at times is misunderstood. It is suggested the economic consequence criteria of the TERAG be reviewed to ensure a true classification of the potential economic impact on commercial forestry is assessed for large scale events. STT and the forest industry is prepared to develop a simple ready reckoner to assist in assessing forest value. This would assist the TERAG process but also provide information on all levels of fires where TERAG may not be applied or required.

STT would like to highlight in addition to the lightning strike fires, STT attended 19 fires that were either confirmed or suspected arson. Eighteen of which occurred across the north of the state. Arson is a regular contributor to fire starts each season and should not be forgotten about in a season dominated by lightning strike impact.

2. The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings.

Community messaging and warnings was managed by the TFS. STT believes this was very well managed, effective and appropriate over a long period that provided many challenges including potential warning fatigue. STT were consulted, invited and involved with media events and releases when required and relevant.

3. The timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy, including accommodating the priorities of life, property, timber production and forest asset values, and environmental and cultural values by Tasmanian fire agencies.

On occasions wet forest types can be viewed as a natural boundary to fires where a run may occur only to reach the forest and self-extinguish or slow down. With the commercial value of forests on PTPZ and private lands, this not only may have serious financial impact but create a program of works to attend and extinguish/mop up and patrol a fire that may have been avoided if managed differently. This has the flow on effect of staff redirected from normal duties therefore impacting on corporate business.

Clear procedures and established processes providing advanced or streamlined approval for fire management activities (involving heavy machinery, hazardous/burning tree removal etc) could enhance fire responses and rehabilitation works in sensitive areas, reserves and conservation areas.



Research suggests an ongoing increase in extreme weather events, frequency of dry lightning, prolonged periods of dry to very dry conditions, rising temperatures and changing vegetation types. It may be necessary to review current firefighting tactics and research/identify opportunities for alternative or additional tactics such as evening/night firefighting and backburning.

On the night of January 28th the Southwood site was under ember attack from the Riveaux Road fire. In anticipation the TFS had assessed the site and deemed the Neville Smith Products (NSP) mill as defensible, but the Ta Ann site as not defensible.

On this night STT firefighters, although willing to stay on site, were directed to leave by the TFS on safety reasons. This was a point of frustration for STT, particularly given the understanding that NSP was defensible and the considerable financial investment and value of this site. In hindsight it may have been worthwhile to have a specific action plan for the Southwood site should it come under ember attack, to provide clear and concise direction and understanding of what actions may or may not be possible during such an event. This should be a consideration for future similar situations.

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

STT is an active partner and supporter of the Strategic Fuel Reduction Burning Program. Fuel reduction burning is a viable practice and can have a positive effect in moderating bushfire intensity and mitigating risk to life and property.

Whilst no specific examples for planned fuel reduction burning can be provided by STT for the areas affected by fire, there are many examples from commercial forestry operations where the traditional practice of burning modified fuels post harvest assisted in moderating or holding fire activity. In addition, access for responding firefighters is increased to and within the fire areas by the network of roads constructed for forestry operations, along with fire lines constructed around individual harvested and regenerated areas.

Consideration should be given to increasing the amount of fuel reduction burning within a fire response, ie backburning. Understanding sensitive or commercial areas may be impacted to some degree, strategic backburning may increase opportunity for holding a fire, providing a buffer that can contribute to preventing a running fire impacting a far greater area and inflicting far greater damage and a further drain on resources.

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.

The structure of a State Operations Centre (SOC), Regional Operations Centre (ROC) and IMT can and does work well.

However it is very resource hungry, provides opportunity for duplication, overlap, potential gaps and at times some confusion with where responsibility lies and for this it is suggested a review be undertaken. Appropriately the SOC is dominated by TFS. At times greater consultation with other land managers would be beneficial and appreciated when major decisions are considered or made.

A particular situation being on February 18th when the decision to downscale interstate resources and prioritise the resourcing of certain fires over others was drafted and submitted to the DCO for approval. Whilst the outcome was generally favourable for STT, no STT consultation occurred despite managing



over 45,000 ha of the land impacted within the fire areas. STT was represented at the SOC daily, providing ample opportunity for the discussion.

In situations like the recent event, the structure of a ROC works very well. Committed to a number of fires, STT was at capacity in all 3 Regions this summer and the ability to rely on the ROC to respond and deal with any new starts on PTPZ land worked well and was appreciated.

With the introduction of a SOC, ROC and IMT structure the role of the MAC Group has changed during large scale events.

For Level 3 fires the MAC Group remain in daily contact with the Incident Controller. The issues discussed are currently covered by a SOC structure during major or multiple events.

There is an absolute need for a MAC Group, particularly for the periods outside of an established SOC, yet it is suggested a review of responsibilities is undertaken to ensure the MAC operates efficiently, represents their respective agencies and contributes to firefighting campaigns at a strategic level. Greater involvement from Heads of Agencies, in whatever form, should also be considered.

At all levels, the interagency interaction between TFS, STT and PWS is critical to the successful management of incidents at all levels. Providing great support is the SES and government resources from the Interoperability Reference Group. The relationship is strong and is a model that is widely recognized across Australia.

At a localised level, there remains to be disconnect between IMT's and the fireground. Face to face contact is important, provides a greater situation awareness and opens up communication channels. This was evidenced with the under resourcing of the Geeveston depot, when it was viewed by the IMT as running efficiently.

There were also issues, as with many fires, of the location of staging areas/briefing points. There were at times many staff travelling very long distances for briefings prior to leaving for the fireground. A process of selecting, establishing and reviewing staging areas should be developed that will assist in site selection and managing time efficiencies for crews.

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.

The Interstate and International Liaison Unit implemented by the TFS provides an effective avenue for the requesting, deployment and returning of interstate and international resources.

STT acknowledges and fully appreciates the assistance provided by the many agencies across Australia and New Zealand to all levels of the response. The response provided and sustained to the fires this summer would not have been possible without that assistance.

It is a challenging process to request and gain approval for resources. Better understanding is required of what is expected to trigger approval for interstate assistance.

It is suggested the process is reviewed and clearly communicated to provide full understanding ahead of the need for submitting a request.

Given the high level approval required and the expense involved, the process of discussing the merit for and approval of interstate requests should involve the Heads of Agencies of the TFS, STT and PWS. Additional local resources are available with an increase in training. There has been no regular opportunities for IMT functional role training for STT staff for a number of years. The Inter Agency



Training Committee has undertaken a skills gap analysis but agency support is required to provide funds and make staff available for training.

Another resource that is available and at times may be overlooked is from the forest industry. With extensive experience in land and forest management, heavy machinery operation and supervision, prescribed burning and firefighting the forest industry has a capacity of over 100 personnel and over 40 appliances.

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)

Aerial firefighting is an area that is quickly developing with larger aircraft and greater water carrying capacity becoming more readily available. It can be effective in the right environment and conditions, but is an area where expenditure can quickly escalate with potentially little impact to the fireground if not managed, supervised or coordinated effectively.

The use of Very Large and Large Air Tankers (VLAT and LAT) is relatively new to Tasmania. There is mixed feedback from the fireground in terms of their effectiveness.

It is suggested that as per Recommendation 10 of the AFAC Independent Operational Review in 2016, a review of the effectiveness of aerial firefighting should be undertaken to better understand the cost effectiveness of specific fire suppression strategies and tactics in different vegetation types.

A process for evaluating and reporting daily aircraft operations should be introduced to confirm the effectiveness and provide opportunity to consider the continuation or re-tasking to a more suitable task or environment if needed.

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

Finance

Monitoring of expenditure is a challenging process when multiple agencies are involved. Under the Inter-Agency Fire Management Protocol the TFS, STT and PWS assist each other with fire response regardless of tenure. Reconciliation of costs is undertaken in May of each year where agencies redistribute funds according to tenure responsibility. It can be several months before the actual cost or responsibility of cost for a fire is known, this can create cashflow and budget challenges.

It is suggested that consideration be given to the establishment of a finance team, involving representation from each agency to monitor and report on expenditure and address any cross agencies issues that may arise from differing systems. The MAC Group had initiated the development of triggers for the establishment of a finance section, this should be reviewed and finalised by the relevant financial managers from each agency.