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SUBMISSION TO THE AFAC REVIEW INTO THE 2018-19 TASMANIAN BUSHFIRES

We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to this review and acknowledge our lack of expertise in firefighting issues but hope we can contribute to the discussion.

As a Huon Valley community group our primary area of concern is on the fires that directly affected our community but some of our comments and questions may well be relevant to the bigger picture.

Timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy

The first question that is being asked in our community is: “Why was a relatively small fire, in exceptionally dry bushland near Riveaux Road (less than 4 kilometers from the Tahune Airwalk) during a period of fairly benign weather, not extinguished before it became a widespread conflagration that destroyed forests, plantations, properties and put an entire community at risk?”



We have been informed that this photograph was taken on the 16th January, the day after the dry lightning strikes, and that it shows the point of ignition of the fire that was thereafter named the “Riveaux Road Fire”. This appears to show a small fire front in fairly open terrain with little wind behind it.

From the TFS web site

“Location Riveaux Road, Southwest

20th of January: Attending resources: TFS resources arrived, 2 x LIGHT TANKER, 1 X MEDIUM TANKER

Size: 6.5 hectares

21st January: Attending resources: TFS resources arrived, 2 x LIGHT TANKER

Size: 38.6 hectares “

We recognise that this may not give an accurate description of all the resources being deployed during this period but would be very surprised if the areas affected are very inaccurate. The weather during the period between 16th and 20th was neither extremely hot nor windy and it is difficult to understand why this fire was not extinguished.

It appears that the fire started in a previously logged coupe which would have been tinder dry but should have been easily accessible for fire fighters.

It is incomprehensible that a relatively small fire close to an important tourist attraction and adjacent to and “upwind” of a vast forest and plantation reserve that was clearly identified as being exceptionally dry was not given the highest priority.

Unless there are factors that we are unaware of the only conclusion we can draw is that there was serious mismanagement by those responsible for fire control.



This satellite image indicates that “ground zero” was ~ 4 km from the Tahune Airwalk

After the 21st of January the fire grew exponentially and despite the significant firefighting resources deployed. Our community might well have been far more severely impacted had it not been for unseasonal rain and cooler weather.

Many rumours have been circulating but there appears to be a consensus that there was some kind of “dispute” between the fire agencies involved in tackling the fire at this early stage. The details around this vary but most relate to “jurisdictional” responsibilities or “land tenure” issues and refusal of access for bulldozers due to environmental concerns.

As TFS Chief Officer, Chris Arnol, has stated that "the classic strategy for remote area firefighting is the use of aircraft for initial attack: the aircraft hold the fire 'so that we can get the boots on the ground'".¹

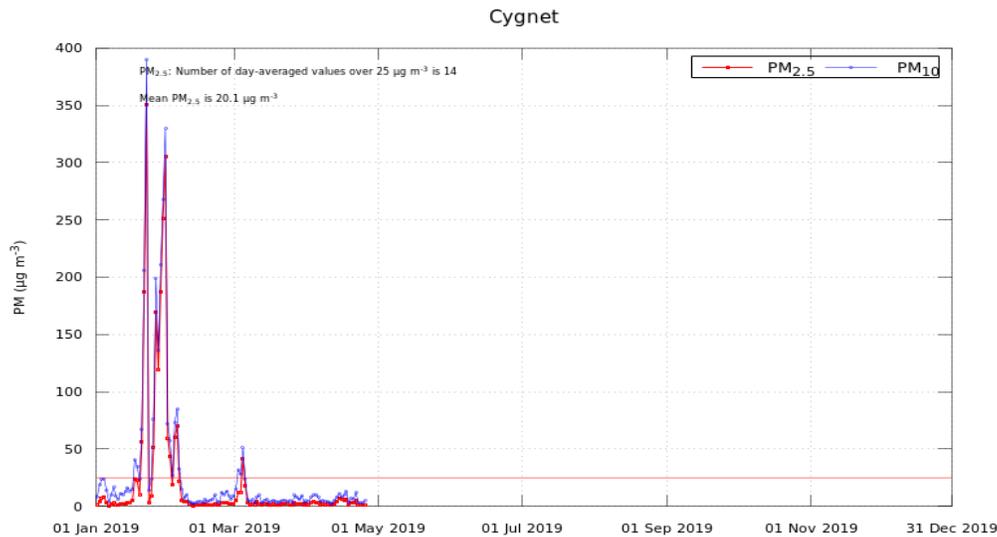
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We recognise that aerial firefighting is extremely expensive and may be of limited value in difficult or extreme conditions. As noted above it can be extremely effective when tackling embryonic fires and especially so in areas that are otherwise difficult of access. It appears most likely that had the Riveaux Road fire been appropriately attacked from the air within 24 hours it could have been brought under control and then extinguished.

Our community needs to have a clear and unequivocal explanation of exactly what happened during this critical period. Who was responsible? Who made what decisions, when and why? And most importantly, we need an assurance that any and all factors that may have contributed to delay in an effective response have been clearly identified, that recommendations are made to help prevent any repeat of this, and that these recommendations are implemented with immediate effect.

Community messaging and warnings

- The TFS and Sentinel websites provided valuable information during the emergency but much of the TFS information was generalised and did not pinpoint specific locations of concern and/or firefighting activity. This led to many people believing themselves to be in imminent danger when they were not. While it is understandable that those responsible for disseminating critical information will, and should, err on the side of caution it is not helpful if residents are kept in a heightened sense of danger over a long period. This may lead to complacency (“the boy who cried wolf syndrome”). It should be noted that during the emergency period the information on the TFS site became more detailed and useful.
- In some of the more remote areas of the municipality radio reception is not good. ABC AM radio appears to be broadcast from the mainland over the weekend and so local fire information is not available. FM reception is very patchy and many stations do not broadcast emergency updates. NBN and mobile phone coverage is also patchy and can be interrupted completely when local transmitters are out of action due to the fire. What can be done to improve this?
- The “live-streamed” HVC/TFS information sessions were very much appreciated by the community in general. Live-streaming was particularly valuable as it allowed the many residents who could not attend the events in person to get the information promptly
- The dangers of smoke pollution were not clearly explained during the early period of the emergency. Due to the prevailing weather conditions some areas had prolonged and extreme smoke levels with the more dangerous PM2.5 pollutants peaking as high as 1100µg/m³ with 24 hour averages above 350µg/m³. Often, just a few kilometers away the air was relatively clean. The EPA website provides useful and accurate, but extremely localised, information. Perhaps a supplementary method of indicating and communicating air quality could be used during bushfire emergencies. Might webcasting optimised dual polarimetric radar data might provide the public with a more useful indication of the distribution of the smoke plume at any given time?



EPA “24 hour averaged” air quality data for Cygnet

- We have been informed that some firefighting personnel hold lengthy “conversations” over the radio rather than using it solely for important communications and adhering to “on-air” protocols.
- One resident (whose home and outbuildings were destroyed) mentioned that, before returning to the site, he was not informed of any of the potential dangers (ie damaged asbestos sheeting, “widow maker” branches on nearby trees, damaged chemical containers etc.). He was personally aware that such dangers might be present but was nonetheless surprised not to be formally notified. Should this be standard protocol in such situations?

The use and effectiveness of aerial firefighting resources

It is recognised that early morning is the best time of day to conduct firefighting operations with both the wind and temperature being more favourable.

- Many experienced fire fighters were apparently frustrated by a lack of timely instructions and felt that “head office” was sometimes out of touch with the situation on the ground. That by the time decisions were made the situation on the ground had evolved and the instructions received were no longer relevant.
- We have received a number of reports that neither spotter aircraft nor TFS ground crew were out and about assessing the situation at first light.

Fire management in the native forest estate and forest plantations: now and into the future.

Many questions have been raised about how well Forestry (SST) and private forest plantations are managed in relation to fire and what can be done to better protect them and the nearby communities.

- Are fire trails and fire breaks adequate and, where they exist, are they maintained appropriately? Who monitors/enforces compliance?
- We have been told that many of the forestry fire trails are used extensively by private 4WD vehicles in all weathers and that this sometimes renders them impassable for larger (ie firefighting) vehicles and that access for sometimes made impossible due to fallen trees and branches. Is track maintenance adequate? Is there a requirement that tree growth be kept well back from the sides of roads?

- It is recognised that eucalypt and pine plantations, by their very nature, are extremely fire prone due to their structure, the flammable nature of the trees themselves and the fact that they have a drying effect on their environment. Should it be a requirement that all plantations of a certain size (say 50ha +) have a perimeter planting of “fire retardant” trees? ²
- Should **all** native forest and highly flammable plantations in proximity to habitations and urban areas be required to have a perimeter planting of “fire retardant” trees to slow the advance of wildfire and “catch” embers?
- The Ta Ann timber processing facility at Southwood has been the beneficiary of many millions of taxpayer dollars over the years and suffered significant damage during the fire. Reports from TFS personnel indicate that the facility was very poorly prepared for such an event. There were significant stands of highly flammable vegetation adjacent to the buildings and log piles (at less than 40m). Being located next to a river it seems surprising that extensive sprinkler systems were not in place. Should government funding not be conditional on adequate (or even excellent) fire protection?
- Similar questions might be asked about installed fire protection at the Tahune Airwalk.

General firefighting resources

- Is Tasmania adequately equipped for fighting major wildfire emergencies in extreme fire weather conditions?
- Are we too dependent on interstate and international personnel and resources?
- Are available resources actually used efficiently? We have had numerous independent reports of operators of earth moving equipment being ready to start for work at 7am and waiting until late morning for instructions to be relayed from “head office”. This not only means that considerable time is lost but adds considerable to the overall cost of the operation as these sub-contractors have to be paid for standby time
- We have had reliable reports of spot fires being identified by members of the public at first light who say that there was no response when they called them in.
- We have heard that some of the firefighting tankers deployed to tackle the bushfires were unsuited for operation off sealed roads due to being “top heavy”. If this is, in fact, the case perhaps this should be taken into consideration when purchasing new equipment.

With hotter and drier conditions forecast we can expect more frequent extreme conditions and it is quite probable that other states will be facing similar conditions at the same time: especially Victoria. This may mean that we cannot call on our neighbours for assistance and so should be more self-reliant.

With the “fire season” becoming longer in duration in both hemispheres we may be unable to rely on support from North American aerial firefighting equipment or personnel. Time is often of the essence as we have seen when a recent fire just north of Hobart that could have become a major incident but was promptly extinguished.

- We maintain that TFS should have (or be able to call upon) sufficient aerial firefighting to able to combat potentially dangerous fires within hours of them being identified as such.
- In addition to having better resources available locally we believe that there may be a strong case for the creation of an aerial firefighting capability as part of the Australian Defence Force rather than relying on State

agencies and commercial operators to provide these services? We request that the review panel consider recommending that the Federal Government commission an independent cost benefit analysis into how Australia's aerial firefighting capabilities can best be provided into the future.

- It has been noted that the Federal Government is currently spending more than \$17 billion on fighter jets while only contributing around \$50m a year towards aerial firefighting capabilities.
- The RAAF has many and varied aircraft and highly skilled pilots. Existing aircraft that are under-deployed could be converted using existing or developing technology ³
- It was noted that while we had a fire emergency the north of Queensland was experiencing severe flooding. In Townsville, the army was quickly mobilised and provided valuable logistical and other support. This kind of action not only provides excellent training in "real life" situations but relieves some of the pressure experienced by other services that are often entirely or partially provided by volunteers. It is unreasonable, unrealistic and unfair to expect volunteers to work for extended periods. Our volunteers were stretched to the limit and many business owners felt obliged to pay employees while they were away from work even if they could ill afford it. Why was there no assistance from the ADF during our emergency situation? Even if not trained as firefighters they could have been providing valuable assistance monitoring for spot fires ahead of the main fire front etc. Perhaps some ADF personnel should be trained to the same level as our volunteer fire brigades.

Public road closures

Many public roads were closed for extended periods which led to considerable inconvenience for many residents. The proximity of the fire to Franklin and Geeveston necessitated closure of the Huon Highway which meant that those in the far south found themselves having to make the decision to stay or leave long before there was any immediate danger of fire.

- Is there perhaps a greater role for on-water public transport which should be relatively safe during periods when the roads are closed? This might allow evacuated residents to visit and maintain their properties, tend stock etc and so reduce the stress experienced in the community.
- With many residents very publicly "away from home" during this period the perfect opportunity existed for opportunistic burglary and looting. Is there a need for a greater police presence with active patrols during evacuation periods? Again, perhaps ADF personnel could be providing assistance to relieve the work load on police.

Climate Change

- Given the relevance of climate change to the whole question of fire management and prevention now and into the future we feel that members of the fire review panel should formally respond to the recent joint statement issued by 23 former fire and emergency services chiefs (including Mike Blanks and Tony Brown who have a combined 69 years of service here in Tasmania) ⁴

³ (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273124144_Aerial_Bushfire_Quencher_C-17_Conversion_for_Fire_Fighting_Operations) <https://helitak.com.au/helitak-fire-tank/>

⁴ https://emergencyleadersforclimateaction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CC_MVSA0184-Firefighting-and-Emergency-Services-Statement-A4-Version_V4-FA.pdf