

Chris J Arthur OAM

Inquiry into Bushfire and the WHA Tasmania

I am a practitioner of some 30 years in firefighting and as a manager of fire suppression; I was until 2014 the Parks @ Reserves Manager West Coast for the Parks and Wildlife Service.

I have been a level 3 incident controller for numerous fires in the WHA and Tasmania in General.

I would like to make the following observations regarding the last fire season.

That the Hazard Reduction programme funded by government is focussed on the Urban interface it is not focussed on slowing or managing landscape fires that have been a feature of the last 15 years of change in the fire environment in Tasmania the large button grass plains that surround Frenchman's Cap have not been managed to protect the alpine vegetation at Frenchman's and Lake Vera which were threatened many years ago by a fire lit on the Lyell Highway..

That the skills and knowledge of the land has been lost in both PWS and Forestry Tasmania this is evidenced by during the fire season the retired district forester of the west coast was asked to go and assess the fire starts but when he had undertaken an aerial assessment his findings were discounted and the management of the fires was moved from Zeehan to centrally managed by TFS Burnie where the distance to the fires was significant with the loss of span of control.

The centralisation of the incident control system as advocated by the TFS where there is large IMT teams based in Burnie, Launceston and Cambridge is a way of increasing the costs and difficulty of IMTs to be able to make timely and manageable decisions and hides them from the community I have had many incidents whereas the IC I have had to deal with older residents from Zeehan where the town was burnt in the 1980s.a.

That the IMT system works but the RFOC system means that there is a parallel IMT sometimes depending on strength of personalities RFOCs who are supposed to support become the decision making system I experienced this situation during a fire as Incident Controller a few years ago.

I have managed IMT as an IC managing fires from places as diverse as Tullah Zeehan Great Lake, Strahan and Glenorchy by centralising the IMTs you are making them a staffing black hole rather than managing the fire near the source.

There is no incentive for PWS staff or other staff other than financial to undertake the Incident Controller Role you are appointed by letter told you have the responsibility both legal and financial and you have to report to the central operations IMAC, TFS appoints Incident controllers as part of their staff training and are bound up by the formal structure but the two other firefighting agencies in the state appoint by training and custom and practice. The TFS is bound by legislation to protect property and life but the environment does not get a look in if any private property is threatened. For all my career PWS fire plans and management plans has that Alpine vegetation is a major priority for protection for fire management.

There is a major thread or thought that the Wilderness can cope with and deal with major fire events I have seen Huon Pine forest burnt and alpine and other resources lost in fires that I have managed.

The Giblin River Fire burnt the Davey River and Davey River Gorge where Huon Pine forest.

The Lake Mackintosh fire saw fire impact on the King Billy Stands on Mt Romulus.

The many fires around Zeehan have seen the loss of the remanet Huon Pine forest near Zeehan.

I have also seen fires impact on major areas of rainforest in my career where they were replaced with more flammable vegetation.

Fuel reduction burning is a major tool to manage the sedge lands and button grass plains but I have burnt button grass plains in May and fought fires in the same plains in October.

I understand that there were difficulties in managing the scale of the fires this past summer but with detailed knowledge and skills an accurate triage of the fires taking in all the values i.e. environmental and physical i.e. private assets or forest s can be managed.

I have managed fires in the Tarkine region managing from the Savage River Mine and near Cradle Mt where the local weather patterns has caused issues in managing staff and physical suppression assets i.e. helicopters when they are grounded by smoke.

In my extensive experience other than climate change the other major landscape issues for firefighting in Tasmania when we are in dry periods is the amount of combustible vegetation that has been impounded due to the activities of hydro Tasmania I have fought fires in many hydro impoundments i.e. Lake Argent lake mackintosh where I have had to utilise explosives to remove the burning trees in the impoundments which are providing wicks for fire

I believe that due to the reliance on computer modelling and the utilisation of computers to quantify assets the loss of local on the ground knowledge of the land and an acceptance that the Climate change is the big driver of these landscape fire they could been managed differently.

Yours sincerely

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