

The Secretary
Senate Environment and Communications References
Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



14 April 2016

SUBMISSION TO: Inquiry into the response to, and lessons learnt from, recent bushfires in remote Tasmanian wilderness

SUMMARY

1. The 1999 Management Plan for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) prescriptions on fire suppression clearly prioritise the protection of rare and threatened fire sensitive species ahead of all other objectives except for the protection of human life. Several aspects (described below) of the recent bushfires suggest that this prioritisation was not effectively implemented in the operational management of the recent fire-fighting efforts. If the outstanding universal values of the TWWHA are to be protected in the long-term, this must be addressed.
2. It is impossible to effectively prioritise fire-fighting efforts to protect natural values if the locations of the values being protected are not accurately known. As described below, there is reason to doubt the accuracy of the vegetation mapping which is relied on to provide this information. It is therefore essential that a state-wide review of the accuracy of mapping of all fire sensitive natural values is undertaken, and resources made available to improve the quality of such data if it is determined to be deficient.

BACKGROUND

On 13 January 2016 a series of dry lightning strikes ignited bushfires which eventually burned a substantial area within the TWWHA. These fires had the potential to obliterate much, if not most, of the unique Gondwanan alpine vegetation¹ that is a major contributor to the outstanding universal value of the TWWHA (i.e. one of the main reasons why it is a World Heritage Area). We were extremely fortunate that their outbreak was followed by a spell of unusually benign weather which saved us from the “worst case scenario” and facilitated efforts to control them; the fires were minor compared to what they could have been. At one point the unique Pencil Pine forests in the Walls of Jerusalem appeared lost – one day of severe fire weather would have burned these forests and pushed the fire across much of the Central Plateau.

The loss of fire-sensitive vegetation from the TWWHA that has occurred over the past 200 years is still visually evident in the landscape in many areas. It seems likely

¹ Many of these species are unusually fire sensitive. Recovery after a fire, if it occurs at all, is extremely slow. Fire in these vegetation communities is likely to result in their permanent loss.

that these historic fires were largely human-caused but since the early 2000s fires started by dry lightning have become the most significant concern (Pyrke, 2016).

The recent fires provide confirmation of this, namely that climate change in conjunction with a severe El Niño event has fundamentally changed the risk of wildfire in Tasmania (Bowman, 2016), but they also remind us that this poses very real risk to one of the most important values of the TWWHA.

MANAGEMENT PLAN PRESCRIPTIONS

The 1999 Management Plan for the TWWHA (which is still the current management plan) contains (page 108) the following prioritisation for fire suppression:

- first priority will always be the protection of human life;
- second priority will be the protection of rare and threatened fire sensitive species and communities and
- third priority will be the protection of substantial and valuable infrastructure.

This prioritisation does not appear to have been effectively implemented in the operational management of the recent fire-fighting efforts.

PRIORITISATION OF FIRE-FIGHTING EFFORT

The El Niño of summer 2015-16 was confirmed by mid-2015 so the authorities had plenty of advance warning that this was very likely to be an unusually dry summer in western Tasmania, yet the initial response to multiple dry lightning strikes on 13 January appeared very slow, even though it was immediately apparent that this was a potentially catastrophic situation. Initially, there was no public acknowledgement of the threat to World Heritage values and no public indication that any resources were going into remote area fire-fighting² while media coverage concentrated on the protection of a few shacks on the west coast and it appears to have taken about a week for PWS/TFS to realise that they needed to accept offers of assistance from interstate.

PWS fire-fighting appeared to have been poorly prioritised on the Central Plateau where some of the damage to Pencil Pine communities occurred close to the fire boundary. i.e. it appears to have been done while the fire burned slowly. i.e. it appears that it could have been contained earlier.

The PWS has been praised for saving a half-built re-creation of a traditional hut (Sandy Lake) while nearby Pencil Pines were destroyed (rumour suggests by back-burning to protect the hut).

It is essential that the protection of fire sensitive World Heritage and other natural values is better prioritised in future.

OFFICIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF IMPACTS ON NATURAL VALUES

To the best of TNPA's knowledge there have been no official public statements (either during or after the fires) to quantify the areas of particular vegetation types burned or the impacts on World Heritage or other natural values. The TNPA notes that some of the media coverage which did focus on these concerns was seriously

² It been suggested that the TFS website (the main public source of information) showed only TFS resources at particular fires, not those from other agencies such as PWS, thereby presenting an extremely distorted picture of the remote area fire-fighting effort where most of the resources were from PWS. If correct this needs to be rectified.

inaccurate and verging on hysterical – possibly this could have been avoided if quality information had been provided by the relevant authorities in a timely manner.

MAPPING OF FIRE SENSITIVE NATURAL VALUES

The TNPA has great concern about the ability to protect fire sensitive species until inadequacies in vegetation mapping have been rectified.

Any accurate assessment of the impact of the recent fires on the World Heritage and other values of the TWWHA requires comprehensive and reliable GIS data delineating the spatial extent of such values. One such value is Gondwanan vegetation, exemplified by the endemic Pencil Pine forests and woodlands on the Central Plateau, and the devastating impact of the recent fires on such vegetation has figured prominently in media reports. The TNPA has conducted a basic review of existing vegetation mapping data³, comparing the location of a number of known Pencil Pine stands in the Lake Mackenzie area with the mapped extent of such communities. This has identified a number of serious spatial and coding errors in the vegetation mapping. If this is the case in this small sample area then it is possible that many more such errors occur elsewhere. This has major implications for GIS-based assessments of fire impacts (e.g. areas of sensitive vegetation types burnt) and it is self-evident that it is impossible to effectively prioritise fire-fighting efforts if the locations of the values being protected are not accurately known.

It is therefore essential that a state-wide review of the accuracy of mapping of all fire sensitive natural values is undertaken, and resources made available to improve the quality of such data if it is determined to be deficient.

The TNPA can provide supporting information at a public hearing, if invited.

Yours sincerely,

Catharine Errey
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References:

Bowman, David: *Fires in Tasmania's ancient forests are a warning for all of us*; The Conversation, 29 January 2016.

Pyrke, Adrian: *Fire in the wilderness*; TNPA News No 22, Summer 2016.

³ Publically-available GIS data from the Tasmanian Government's Land Information System – The LIST – which comprises the best-available vegetation mapping data state-wide