

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

**Submission to the Environment and Communications References Committee
Response to, and lessons learnt from, recent bushfires in remote Tasmanian wilderness**

Dear member of the committee,

Save the Tarkine is a not-for-profit conservation organisation that has as its primary objective the gaining of National Park and World Heritage protection for the Tarkine Wilderness in north western Tasmania. We make this submission in relation to the impact of the 2016 fires in the Tarkine region. This submission will refer to the Tarkine, and not comment on the impacts on the TWWHA.

While accurate mapping is yet to fully emerge, it is expected that the 2016 bushfire season has burnt over 80,000ha of forests, heath lands and button grass in the Tarkine. At this point, it is not possible to verify how much of the affected area is rainforests, however it is likely to fall in the range of 10,000-20,000ha, representing 5-10% of the Tarkine's rainforest.

Impacts on cool temperate rainforests are significant. Unlike heath lands, button grass, and eucalypt forests, cool temperate rainforest is not adapted to fire, and does not regenerate following hot fires. Loss of any cool temperate rainforest is a tragic loss to the nation, however a loss on this scale to the largest remaining tract of cool temperate rainforest in Australia should be of considerable concern.

The unprecedented dryness of the Tarkine's rainforest has led to forests that normally resist fire becoming dry and highly susceptible to fire. Climate change, and in particular the hotter summers experienced over the past decade, are having a significant impact on fire risk to rainforests.

Additionally, incursions by logging, mining and mining exploration activity is altering the fire resistance of the rainforests of the Tarkine. Rainforest adjacent to disturbances are more prone to drying and therefore increased fire risk. Changes to vegetation as a result of replacing rainforest with plantation or eucalypt dominated regrowth forests also increase fire risk. It appears in the case of these fires that the fire path has followed paths of disturbance

from previous logging activity, and spreading to rainforests as larger, more intense fires. Conversely, where fires started within undisturbed rainforest, they remained as smaller and relatively contained fires. The fires in the vicinity of Dempter plains seem to demonstrate this pattern.

In terms of the response to the fires, of particular concern are the issues of timeliness of the response, and the availability of adequate resources for fighting the fires. It is clear to us that the delay in responding to the fire threat contributed to the inability to control or contain the fire at an earlier stage. Delays in acceptance and deployment of offers of assistance from interstate and NZ fire services and the army resulted in less fire fighting resources being available at this earlier stage.

The adequacy of the current mix of fire fighting resources to the task of fighting large fires in remote areas has been found lacking in this fire season. The effectiveness of large waterbombing aircraft in supporting on-ground fire fighting efforts has been seen in other fires nationally and internationally, and yet these aircraft are not part of the Tasmanian capacity, and contracted planes from interstate were only available on a single day. The current system of each state contracting these services from private overseas firms appears to be a factor in the inability of small states such as Tasmania to procure these services. This seems to be a nonsensical position given that the Royal Australian Air Force already maintains pilots (including C-130 pilots) and ground crew capable of supporting a permanent squadron of heavy waterbombing aircraft. It can easily be argued that the risk of uncontrolled bushfire, a threat that is realised every year in various parts of the nation, is a key threat to national defence and warrants a national capacity being maintained.

It may be some months before accurate mapping of the fire impacts are available, and even longer before any analysis can be conducted by experts in the relevant fields. A push to early findings is likely to result in inaccuracies resulting from incomplete data. As such, we recommend that this inquiry should not rush to final recommendations.

It is our view that this committee should however make interim recommendations relating to managing risks, and improving responses. In particular the committee should give consideration to interim recommendations of:

1. Development of a standing, national large waterbombing aircraft capacity,
2. A moratorium on logging in the Tarkine rainforests,
3. Increased action on avoiding the impacts of climate change.

We would also take this opportunity to acknowledge the tremendous efforts of the fire fighters from a variety of agencies and jurisdictions, and the associated personnel including bulldozer operators, pilots, and logistics providers, and to the health care workers, police catering and accommodation providers and wildlife carers who contributed to the fire fighting efforts. We thank them for their service.

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Save the Tarkine