

Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications,

## **INQUIRY – RESPONSE TO, AND LESSONS LEARNT FROM, RECENT BUSHFIRES IN REMOTE TASMANIAN WILDERNESS.**

I am submitting my thoughts and questions for the inquiry into the Tasmanian bushfires that recently decimated parts of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It was with gut-wrenching sadness that I viewed the photographs of the devastation of parts of the TWWHA and although only 1-2% was affected, that damage was concentrated in areas that I know intimately as I am a Central Plateau area bushwalker and fisherwoman and have done so for 39 years.

Two weeks before the fires broke out, I was bushwalking in the vicinity of the Walls of Jerusalem National Park and I can attest to the dryness of the peat soils in that area. At Easter I was bushwalking in the southern end of the Cradle Mt.-Lake St. Clair National Park and the soil is still really dry and this is of such great concern because it is a symptom of our changing climate. It's happening now and I fear that the inertia of our human systems and especially our political system will imperil our way of life.

Firefighters themselves commented on how unpredictable fire behaviour was during this season - we are sailing into uncharted waters in Tasmania in regard to fire management. I hope this inquiry may analyse what happened this season and see if we could have done things better and saved life and property AS WELL AS protected the irreplaceable alpine ecosystems of Tasmania's high country that were decimated by fire.

I have some specific questions that I would respectfully request that the Senate Standing Committee consider as part of the inquiry and have listed them below.

1. When the Tasmanian Fire Service realised that numerous fires had been started by lightning strikes on Wednesday, 13th January 2016 and with a Bureau of Meteorology forecast of high fire danger weather in the coming week why didn't they take the opportunity to call for assistance and expertise from other fire services to suppress those fires as soon as possible? From memory the TFS did not believe it was necessary during the early days of the fire disaster. Was this hubris? Was it due to a lack of knowledge regarding the extent of the fires in remote areas due to lack of funding/resources or the technology to scope out the fire extent? Or was it based on incorrect assumptions regarding fire behaviour in alpine areas that used to apply in a different climate regime? That is, a lack of knowledge as to how dry the areas really were and how flammable they had become under drought conditions and consistently above average temperatures?

2. What sort of reconnaissance was conducted between 14th January and 19th January, and by what agencies, to ascertain the extent of fires burning in Tasmania?

3. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS REGARDING THE LAKE MACKENZIE FIRE

A fire was ignited east of Parangana Dam by lightning on the 13th January, 2016. It was reported (on the TFS website) as 0.5 hectares in extent up until the high fire danger day of Tuesday, 19th January 2016 when on that day, the Lake Mackenzie fire (as it became named) erupted onto the plateau and burnt 6000 ha in that day and caused emergency warnings to be issued for communities in the area. If the Lake Mackenzie fire was separate to the Lake Parangana Dam fire how did it escape detection for 5 days before it became so big? If the Lake Mackenzie fire WAS the Lake Parangana Dam fire why was it ignored? What sort of reconnaissance or surveillance was done in that area between 14th-19th January and by what agency and by what means?

4. Did all the agencies responsible for fire management communicate effectively with one another during this period. If not, is this an issue of under-resourcing for fire management or perhaps a lack of guidelines that are required to underpin successful communication between difference agencies?

5. Could more aerial support have been brought in at an earlier stage to suppress the fires burning in sensitive vegetation areas? I have heard the argument that that would have been more damaging to vegetation but I have seen physically damaged, twisted and toppled over pencil pines that are still alive and this would have given these fire-sensitive native pines a chance rather than being destroyed by fire never to be renewed in the time scales meaningful to human beings. It may also have limited the areal extent of damage to the alpine ecosystems.

6. After a period of time and as more vocal criticism began to arise in regard to the fire situation in the TWWHA, the TFS began to provide more information on their website about its efforts to fight the fires BUT ONLY IN REGARD TO THE FIRES IN THE SOUTHWEST NATIONAL PARK on the Gordon River Road. I was very disappointed that no effort was made to update the fire situation on the Central Plateau (in particular, the Lake Mackenzie fire complex and the Lake Bill fire). No new information was forthcoming on the website about what was being done to address these fires and yet they were listed as still going. Similarly, it is my opinion, that the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service were also reticent to update the Lake Bill fire on their website or their facebook page despite being asked specifically about this fire. So was this just a PR exercise to placate the predominantly southern-based critics?

Finally, I in no way, wish to show any disrespect for the job that our emergency services do. It is more about the policies, processes and management structures we put in place to deal with extreme fire weather which is becoming more commonplace. We have to stop looking at these climate events as extreme one-offs and manage accordingly. We have scraped through this fire season and sighed in relief at no loss of life or community (and thank our wonderful "firies" for all they do) but El Nino is a 3-7 year cyclic phenomenon that will return. Coupled with human-induced rising baseline temperatures not only do we stand to lose our alpine ecosystems and our

scenic wonder, but destroy our tourism industry which is an important part of our economy. We also have an international obligation to preserve and protect our wilderness World Heritage Areas, after all, Tasmania's alpine ecosystems contain such rare and unique vegetation found nowhere else on the planet except for a small island in the southern ocean.

Regards,

Lisa Clarkson,