

Submission No.479

Wally
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BY.....

COPY

R.C.Halton

Dick Adams
 Federal Member for Lyons
 Parliament of Australia
 PO Box 50
 Perth
 Tasmania 7300

Re: Inquiry into Incidence & Impact of Bushfires

Dear Dick

Please forgive me for sending my submission so late. I am simply having to make the best of my limited computer skills to present to you worthwhile information.

To introduce myself-- I have worked with Forestry Tasmania state wide in the capacity as a Technical Forester from 1968-1999. I can vividly remember the 1967 wild fire jumping the Derwent River while I was working at the Boyer Newsprint Mill.

Probably the events of 1967 impacted greatly on my forestry career, also being fresh in the minds of my older and former Forestry colleagues. 1967 stood out as a standard of measurement for the impact that fire had left on Tasmanians in a modern post war situation.

With extensive government funding after 1967 wildfire, Tasmania activated its only two fire agencies the Rural Fires Board and the Forestry Commission to play a significant role in wildfire suppression and reduction measures.

Historical Summary:

The Rural Fires Board provided the basis for updated regulations as well as major initiatives as public education, provision of training, radio communications, establishing a state network of firelines and formation of volunteer rural brigades statewide. During the post 1967- early 1970,s the new Tasmania Fire Service had hand picked many of its senior personell to provide worthwhile training courses and fire education. As a Cadet Forest Ranger I can personally say that the schooling was exceptional on usage of radios, fire pumps and tankers in field situations. Forestry and TFS often shared resources fighting fires and assistance to private property owners or isolated communities where fire management objectives served common benefits.

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The Forestry Commission also picked up on many of those initiatives of the T.F.S, however the F.C had a number of distinct advantages.

- A permanent statewide and experienced workforce with immediate access to ground machinery and aircraft for fire fighting and fire suppression.
- Having a dedicated Fire Management Branch (FMB) to advise on a wide range of forest fire management issues. For example, the high intensity burning activity "regeneration burning" devised during the early 1960,s required a thorough understanding of fire ecology and encouraged strict field practices.

Regular fuel reduction burning "low intensity burning" was conducted during spring either by hand or aircraft on areas of moorland (buttongrass plains) and non-lower grade commercial dry forest. This practice was encouraged and budgeted for by the FMB. Field workshops were held with increasing participation from other agencies ie TFS, PWS, HEC and private logging companies.

- The purpose of regular fuel reduction burning is to lessen the effects of wildfire spread to FC assets - commercial forest stands & regeneration protection.
- Intergration of the benefits of fuel reduction burning often occurred through the realization of joint funding and linking a fuel reduction programme to protect numerable assets into a single or preplanned series of annual burning.
- A well field researched and planned fuel reduction burn in a particular location can produce a wide scale of protection benefits against the effects of wildfire for local forest assets ie, power generation infrastructure, isolated townships and local industries, ie mining and tourism enterprises on the West Coast of Tasmania.
- Apart from fire training, the generational inter-exchange "on the job" between both present and former long term Forestry staff from the 1960,s- 1990,s has left a positive outlook on continuing improvements.
- The recent retirement of long term Chief Fire Management Officer will in my opinion leave a "temporary gap" of acquired knowledge to be picked up within the system. Inter agency resource and knowledge sharing was also a feature continually being improved.

Former local giant Forest Companies such as ANM at Maydena and APPM at Burnie had to their benefit, at their disposal large and experienced multi skilled workforce comprising of logging contractors and company owned with ground based machinery.

Through the former Timber Concession system (applying to forested Crown Land) they were well equipped to both protect and develop both their Crown and Freehold assets. These enterprises could finance their own in house "fire management

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activities with value adding involvement through their local Tasmanian pulp and paper production enterprises.

Until about 1986 National Parks and Wildlife Service was not a major player in wildfire management but either soldiered on alone or obtained the assistance of the Tasmania Fire Service or on occasions when a wildfire was threatening widespread areas. Politically, the Forest Commission often became involved in their wildfire suppression activities to prevent the spread of fire from threatening State Forest

During the late 1970,s and early 1980,s NP&WS attempted fuel reduction burning often with mixed results. There was not a close association between FC and NP&WS, however from my own field experience local cooperation did exist with wildfire suppression where local staff from both sides saw the benefits of both a commonsense approach, friendly exchange, resource sharing and local employment benefits. I noted too that some NP&WS officers often worked long hours for little in return with poor equipment, their Senior Officers being not really in touch with the field situation.

I have included the above historical overview as I am sure there are some lessons to be realized. It is from here I will follow the format of your Inquiry in as much my capability and correctness of interperation of its detail.

INQUIRY SUBMISSION DETAILS

(B)and(D) Land Management practices and Policies

State Forest

During the last decade Green Politics has dominated the scene. The occasional failure of both Forest managers to maintain secure high intensity burns has been highlighted by the media and sensationalized by Green groups.

Forest Managers have virtually without exception responded with the best planning and procedures during the past 10 years or so. A pre burning audit system is standard. The same system applies to *Fuel Reduction burning*.

- As I explained in my historical overview the Forestry Commission was the state leader in *Fuel Reduction Burning*, however since Corporatisation and partial joint venture relationship with Raynor, the emerging Forestry Tasmania is often struggling with profitability levels to provide for of its basic running costs and therefore prioritising its efforts towards re establishing forest after harvesting generated mainly from royalties through export of forest products. It is a requirement of the Regional Forest Agreement that all harvested land is reforested.

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- Forestry Tasmania as a Government Business Enterprise is obliged to pay a percentage of any profit to the State Government.
- I am unclear of their current annual Fuel Reduction Burning achievements. I would expect that due to wildfire commitments as well as their increased workload with minimum number of employees there is a requirement to concentrate on core workload ie to meet with annual regeneration and plantation establishment targets.
- FT has lost many of its former experienced field staff in recent times to retirement, redundancy packaging and to better job prospects with private forest companies ie Gunns Ltd.
- Younger university trained and overseas trained Foresters, most with limited or no fire experience are placed in senior roles with attractive salaries and benefits. Field employees are being replaced by Silvicultural contractors who I understand are being progressively being trained in a range of field fire management activities.
 - It is likely to some degree there will be a lag or a loss of acquired fire management competence. The loss of local knowledge and job rationalization is one of those important aspects that is already being noticed.

Areas under control of Parks and Wildlife Service

The Service has been progressively advantaged in the early 1990,s by the transfer of two experienced staff from the Forestry Commission and another from the State Fire Service (also formerly F.C) About the same time a keen fire research person with a pro active approach and excellent field skills was engaged to study Moorland Burning ,and resulted in the standard guidelines used today by the Tasmanian fire agencies.

From this time on the effective reorganization of the three major Fire Agencies occurred through provision of shared technical training modules. As I understand currently PWS,FT and TFS also share trained and fully equipped teams for Fire Seasonal activities ie wildfire suppression and *Fuel Reduction Burning*.

Recently FT Silvicultural contractors have been offered training too.

While PWS carries out fire research I am not familiar with how much *Fuel Reduction Burning* is carried out annually. One should be aware too that the Green Movement infiltrates the Department of Primary Industry , Water and Environment influencing the creation of academic scientific and research positions to discredit and therefore minimise or prevent opportunities for *Fuel Reduction Burning*.

During 2002 the PWS has appointed a number of dedicated District Fire Management officers outside Hobart. I believe that the chosen applicants who have academic qualifications, have limited or no field experience and therefore will be sheltered from the brunt of hard line realities of pro active fire management for some time before benefits are realised. PWS Fire Management Branch based in Hobart has a strong team base and therefore should be able to cope with any inadequacies within the general PWS system.

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Land under PWS control should be maintained in a protective and ecological manner, therefore planned *Fuel Reduction Burning* must be seasonally driven as an essential part of their overall field management strategy.

Much to the credit and drive of certain staff within PWS there is a strong contingent of trained fire fighters available during summer to be dispersed state wide for inter agency bushfire related activities.

Tasmania Fire Service

Most importantly the State Fire Service is fortunate to have both its Urban and Rural wings under the one Authority. First and foremost TFS's role is to protect people and structural property in a fire situation. Trained career firefighters and volunteer brigades carry out this role extremely well in Tasmania.

The TFS has only a minimum number of trained full time personell experienced in bush firefighting. However this needs to be improved as both career opportunity and security may need to be enhanced to provide longer term employment gains in this area.

The TFS has a role in rural Tasmania which should encompass activities to both educate and assist private property owners to become conversant with *Fuel Reduction Burning*. At present this is probably a big ask, unless it is well planned in advance with the local brigades possessing appropriate training, experience and being available as a team when weather conditions are optimal.

* This is a real problem area as everything is becoming more marginalized in modern society, ie volunteer,s spare time to carry the responsibility and the property owners right to complain or worse, sue if things do not turn out as expected. The neighbours complain about the smoke. Ironically the brigade knows it is in the best position if it called to a fire lit by the owner or usually of unknown origin and then take all reasonable steps to extinguish the fire.!

* In a fire call out situation "de facto" fuel reduction can occur as the widely used practice known as back burning. Carried out in a forest situation or in a sensitive and dominant landscape situation it can create a bad and lasting impression of fire suppression practice.

* Inadvertant damage using machinery especially by bulldozers can often cause irreparable environmental damage to soil, water quality and local landscape.

* After wildfires have occurred there is not a clear policy for rehabilitation follow up .

**** Note (J) Roles of Volunteers and Practices

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I am aware that in the greater Hobart area there are five different local councils i.e. Glenorchy, Hobart and Kingsborough, Huon and Derwent Valley where Fire Management Plans are in place as guidelines for Fire Protection measures for both private and public properties including the Wellington Park which encompasses vast areas reserved for Domestic Water Supply as well as for Recreational and Landscape values.

I have noted that three councils have differing approaches for their intentions to carry out their *Fuel Reduction Burning* role. The level of competence varies. Local councillors and senior staff do not appear to appreciate the useful role of fire as a tool in bushland management. There are as many rate payers living in fear of fire each summer as there probably many who distrust the *Fuel Reduction* burning activity to reduce the impacts of wildfire. Councils do carry an emphasis on issuing of abatement notices and subsequent slashing of fire hazards on both Council and private land on an annual basis. That is the easy stuff, now it just a matter of waiting for an unannounced wildfire if no effective broad scale control is carried out. Fires do occur most years in the Greater Hobart area, usually arson. Due to the fact that the Hobart area is well equipped to rapidly respond to wildfires, major disasters have been narrowly avoided in recent years, i.e. 1999 and 2000. It is obvious there needs to be a shake up among the Councils to become proactive as eventually events of wildfire will eventually happen, but unfortunately can incur unnecessary cost, disruption, damage, hardship, insurance premium rises and legal claims.

There is a trend to carry out easier reduction burns more regularly than to at least begin tackling the more difficult and more useful burns for productive fire management.

Private Property

Urban areas adjoining Bushland :

A major problem -- The inquiry should closely examine this aspect of fire protection.

It would be hoped the Tasmania Fire Service could be restructured in such a way to give local councils more support, funding education and *pro active field expertise support to achieve fire protection targets in bushland fringing onto urban areas.*

Council representatives have a tendency to listen to the anti forestry, anti burning, anti smoke pollution rate payer lobby groups backed by GREEN activism. This is certainly the case around the Greater Hobart area.

As an example The Hobart City Council Bushland team offer a wide range of pro active support for its established Bushland groups with weed eradication, seed collection and replanting of native species. Limited Fuel Reduction burning is carried out by appropriate council and volunteer Brigade personell. A of series of complex arrangements among the wide range of policy and personalities involved in the Council decision making process makes it difficult for fire protection targets to be achieved on a seasonal basis.

Apart from their Bushland team it is likely the benefits of fire protection are not probably not clearly or understood by councils.

The fact is, the opportunity for burning when both weather and fuel moisture conditions are optimal, is often very limited during Spring or Autumn. When conditions are suitable during late afternoons, weekends, public holidays or during the Autumn event -10 Days

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on the Island Fuel Reduction Burning should be seen as a more desirable option than waiting for a future wild fire.

I recall the State Premier Jim Bacon this year gave a public undertaking that there would be no burning (Forestry regeneration burns and fuel reduction burns) during the event. Realistically in future, the managers of forestry and bushland fire activities need to meet to find a more flexible solution.

Personally I see the responsibility for bushland fire protection bestowed on councils is really the role of the Tasmania Fire Service to drive and drive hard..

I understand the PWS has involvement in the Wellington Park and therefore obviously needs to be consulted with too.

Rural Land

Many farming properties carry a mixture of cleared and pastured land as well as bush land containing a variety of vegetation types often modified through past or ongoing activities.

From my recent observations many land owners are engaging in forestry related activities to generate extra income. In some cases this activity can occur over a wide range of properties in close proximity of each other in various stages of harvesting or reforestation. Gunns Ltd Tasmania, s largest private timber company operate on both their own properties as well as independently owned private properties.

I would say that Gunns are managing an element of fire management risk from on summer to another. A major fire during this summer at Lake Crescent high lighted the risk to their forestry activities in the area. The fire burnt 2500 ha of poor quality bush and rough pasture, burnt fences, threatened shacks, roaming stock and ignited some unburnt windrows. I hope the Tasmania Fire Service investigated the fire as it was alleged a fire permit was issued to burn log heaps on a private property owner close to Gunns logging areas supposedly during November 2002 ? Clearly an experienced permit officer would not issue a permit for heavy fuels to be lit other than during autumn when the Soil Dryness Index is showing a dropping trend.

It is evident in many areas of the Central Plateau the reforestation method appears to be Shelterwood which generally does not involve burning or limited burning of logging slash to achieve the growing on of retained trees

There are areas being treated as above as well as areas that have been previously harvested and in various stages of harvest ? In many cases it is unclear what is intended Timber Harvesting plans should indicate final land use, either reforestation or clearing for primary production.

From my experience there is a high element of risk to be borne by these cojoined land owners for the medium term fire management risks.

In some cases bark heaps after logging are not burnt, remaining logging slash provides a useful firewood resource which is always in demand and I agree should be utilized.

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An export wood chip industry proves the path for extra farm income but it is apparent it can pass an element of fire management risk with out a properly coordinated land management approach.

Many Primary producers no longer carry out Spring burning to any great extent. Fuel loads build up and eventually are so great that damage can exceed any perceived benefit.

A comment I often hear is the Fire Permit Period is Declared to early so the opportunity to burn is lessened. It is not uncommon in the week or days preceding the declaration of the fire Permit Period as a last desperate measure fires have been lit regardless of the weather conditions causing damage as the impact of a wildfire.

Gunns Ltd

Are Tasmania,s largest private forest company and currently an employer of State significance. Their fire protection activities are not well known to me, however I am aware their response to fire outbreaks should be of a high order given their widespread and large forest asset base around the state.

During recent years many experienced ex FT personell have transferred their skills to Gunns Ltd. Therefore their background would effectively complement Gunn,s forestry operations.

(F) Planning and Building and Land Use Codes

Ongoing improvement to the process should carry through remembering that the public deserve extensive consultation prior to changes to governing regulations.

People generally in a decreasing wealth generation situation, who have the desire to live in the close proximity of bushland need to be well aware of their options to live safely in a bushland environment and to minimise risk from wildfire.

After the Sydney Fires I am sure Insurance Companies have an interest in better building practices and housekeeping management by bush land dwellers.

Any owner in a bush land setting needs to be aware of the risks but at the same time to self equip with an independent and adequate water supply with a portable fire pump system independent of mains power.

A Federal Government incentive scheme could be put in place for persons subject to their income levels, to encourage self fire management to an improved degree.

The restructured Tasmania Fire Service would be the most effective body to drive many of these measures with education through demonstration in liasion with the assistance from local councils.

(G) Current Response for Fire Fighting

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Generally speaking the Three major Fire agencies in Tasmania have in place workable arrangements to adequately respond to Fire Fighting.

The arrangements of the Three Fire Agencies are clearly documented in what is known as the **INTER AGENCY FIRE PROTOCOL**.

Representatives from these agencies meet regularly as the **STATE FIRE MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**. See website www.sfm.tas.gov.au

(J) Roles of Volunteers and Practices

Without a statewide team of trained volunteers within the ranks of the Tasmania Fire Service we certainly would not have the manpower to cope with both response and assistance to community or statewide fire suppression needs.

We must realize there is a wide range of levels of expertise as well as limitations and personal interest, individualism and involvement among the groups.

Please note last three paragraphs : Tasmania Fire Service *** where I have made comment on practices of some volunteer groups, clearly it is the responsibility of the Tasmania Fire Service to improve their environmental knowledge and standard of field practices .

I understand their role of volunteers during the Sydney Fires has been recognized so it hoped the Federal Government will provide funding to benefit the States role on the National front.

FACTUAL SUMMARY for the direction of the INQUIRY

- On the whole ,Tasmania has a more than satisfactory operational response to wildfire situations, especially considering it has contributed to the Sydney fires as well as those in the United States.
- Forestry Tasmania has the strongest operational knowledge of forest fire control
- Local government managing bushland are not working together nor responding to their undertaking of sufficient fire management in areas they "control".
- More government support for the **pro active** role of the Fire Management Branch of the Parks and Wildlife Service incl World Heritage Area fire management.
- The Tasmania Fire Service be given an enhanced and expanded role to deal with all aspects of **pro active** fire management on the majority of private land- both rural and urban bushland as well as certain Crown Land within the proximity of major population centres.
- The Tasmania Fire Service to be granted extra Federal Government to undertake development of improved strategies that engage **pro active** fire management with the overall aim of reducing the impacts and expenditure attending wild fire outbreaks.

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- The Tasmania Fire Service to expand its professionalism by giving rise to employment levels (either full time or seasonally) in Tasmania in areas of natural resource management, forest practices ,increased training and field exercises .
- The inquiry to explore ways to tap funding from areas of Enviro NHT funding as well as ASTIC for indigenous programmes for improved fire management.
- A considerable backlog of **FUEL REDUCTION BURNING** needs to be carried out to reduce the Incidence and Impact of wildfire in Tasmania.

I feel personally pleased that the Federal Government is conducting an Inquiry. I hope I have managed to provide the type of information you are looking for to further improve Tasmania,s role in fire management.

* Please phone or Email me if you require any further information.

Yours faithfully
R.C.Halton

