



**STATE FIRE MANAGEMENT COUNCIL |
Submission to the Royal Commission into the
National Natural Disaster Arrangements**



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*Photo credit: Fuel Reduction
Program*

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Letter from State Fire Management Council Chair

Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin AC (Retd)
Chair, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Dear Air Chief Marshall Binskin (Retd)

The State Fire Management Council (SFMC) welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into the National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

The SFMC is in a unique position to make a submission to the Commission, our members have intimate knowledge and understanding of fire and bushfire management at both the policy and practical operational level, which is well recognised.

The SFMC is established under Section 14 of the *Fire Service Act 1979* (Tasmania), with membership of chief executive and managers drawn from land management agencies, including agriculture and forestry. It has fostered a large range of peer networks, who also understand fire in the landscape, in essence they have “skin in the game”.

SFMC is an independently chaired body that has the responsibility of providing advice to the Minister of Police, Fire and Emergency Management and the State Fire Commission on the management of vegetation fire across Tasmania, particularly in the areas of prevention and mitigation of bushfires. It also formulates and promulgates policy in relation to vegetation fire management within Tasmania.

The primary function of the SFMC is to develop a state vegetation fire management policy that is used as the basis for all fire management planning in Tasmania. The SFMC also oversees and supports the 10 Fire Management Area Committees for each gazetted Fire Management Area of Tasmania. These Committees provide a forum for effective bushfire risk management for their areas through a consistent, comprehensive and collaborative approach.

The SFMC also advises and reports directly to the Minister for Police and Emergency Management on matters that relate to the administration of the Act as it applies to vegetation fire management.

The SFMC Strategic Direction Framework focuses on:

- Research and Innovation; by supporting and promoting bushfire research and innovation,
- Policy; by providing evidence based public policy advice and information
- Community Capacity and Awareness; by building community capacity and awareness to support bushfire resilient communities
- Communication and Collaboration; through building and supporting public and private sector partnerships and collaboration
- Vegetation Fire Management Planning; by enabling strategic, effective and collaborative vegetation fire management planning in Tasmania
- Governance; facilitating efficient and effective governance and resource management.

The SFMC has been involved in several initiatives that have significant impact on improving bushfire resilience within Tasmania, including:

- The establishment of Australia's first strategic cross tenure fuel reduction program, designed to mitigate the risk of bushfires in Tasmania,
- Provision of advice to the State Fire Commission on matters relating to the prevention and extinguishment of vegetation fires,
- Development and delivery of a Red Hot Tips Program; that educates, engages and supports landholders in actively managing their bushfire risk; by encouraging collaborative vegetation fire management and ecological sustainability across the landscape,
- Hosting SFMC Network Events which foster relationships and promote knowledge sharing and collaboration between the public and private sectors involved in vegetation fire management.

The following submission from SFMC primarily focuses on the following parts of the Terms of Reference:

- b. Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and whether accountability for natural disaster risk management, preparedness, resilience and recovery should be enhanced, including through a nationally consistent accountability and reporting framework and national standards;
- f. ways in which Australia could achieve greater national coordination and accountability — through common national standards, rule-making, reporting and data-sharing — with respect to key preparedness and resilience responsibilities, including for the following:
 - i) land management, including hazard reduction measures.

You will note that many of the recommendations put forward in the submission are already being delivered successfully in Tasmania. We feel these concepts can be expanded and refined for adoption nationally.



Ian Sauer
Chair, State Fire Management Council

27 April 2020

Overview

The devastating bushfires of 2019-20 were like many past bushfires in Australia, and indeed overseas. However, there is a history of commonality with these fires. The large amount of flammable fuel in our forests contribute to these uncontrollable mega-bushfires, which have had a profound impact on our economic, social and environmental wellbeing.

This inquiry follows a similar pattern of having an inquiry after a large bushfire season, where past inquiry outputs become nothing more than dusty door stops. In simple terms, the fires Australian communities have had to shoulder over the years are a symptom of long-term inaction, and sadly the devastating outcomes have always been predictable.

It is well accepted south-eastern Australia, including Tasmania, is particularly prone to bushfire and is regarded as one of the most bushfire-affected regions in the world. Although fire forms an important part of the environment and remains essential for biodiversity and renewal; its effects can be catastrophic if uncontrolled.

The SFMC has prided itself in delivering practical, research-driven and sustainable fuel management activities and solutions that deliver a safer Tasmania. Activities complement building codes, regulative frameworks and limit the impact on communities when fires do inevitably occur through effective response. All these facets are supported by sound research from credible sources such as the Bushfire Natural Hazards Commonwealth Research Centre (BNHCRC).

We acknowledge that land managers, private and public, endeavour to take responsibility for making sure their land is managed effectively and bushfire risk is reduced. SFMC will now focus on strengthening this through private landholder programs to assist planning for and mitigating bushfire risk.

It is necessary we see a community culture change when it comes to managing vegetation across the landscape. There needs to be an understanding that fuel reduction burning is a cost-effective tool that not only makes bushfires easier to manage but increases the wellbeing and diversity of the landscape.

Compounding the lack of understanding regarding bushfires and bush management is the rush of commentators from many sectors, who push their personal bias and political agendas, with little fact, understanding or science-based argument. SFMC recognise that one of the challenges continues to be these “influencers” who misdirect the policy discussion with misinformation and make it difficult for good policy and decision making to occur. This also creates irresponsible journalism with sensationalism around stories with unsubstantiated views being presented as truth that is enormously confusing for the public. This again, is where we need to draw on sound research to guide good policy through BNHCRC and CSIRO.

As an instrument of Government our role is to facilitate and coordinate action and create an environment where fuel reduction activities and community capacity building is accepted and desired. Be it the manager of National Park, a forestry block or farm forestry, a hobby farmer, lifestyler, or someone living in a peri urban environment, it is imperative that all the community work together to make that livelihood safe from bushfire. It needs to be clear that bushfire risk is everyone’s responsibility and that the community must not always rely on someone else to fix their problem.

A Tasmanian Model

Tasmania has an established a collaborative model of bushfire management. The state is unique, with the inter-agency bushfire arrangements in its sixteenth edition. The Inter-agency Bushfire Management Protocol is the operating agreement between the three organisations most closely involved with the management of bushfires in Tasmania: the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS), the Parks and Wildlife Service and Sustainable Timber Tasmania. The protocol underpins the cooperative spirit which exists to ensure that the management and suppression of fires in Tasmania is safe, efficient and cost effective.

These arrangements have contributed to the close working relationships of all landowners and managers in Tasmania during bushfire management, planning and response.

Bushfire Risk Management Planning

The SFMC endeavour to coordinate the investment in bushfire risk management across all of Tasmania. It is important that efforts are coordinated because landowners and organisations do not have direct control over all the factors that contribute to their individual bushfire risk, nor can they operate independently of their neighbours in managing their bushfire risk. Therefore, the community must act together, which involves cooperation, coordination and planning.

Under the guidance of SFMC, 10 Fire Management Area Committees (FMACs) coordinate the activities associated with managing bushfire risk within their area. FMACs are made up of stakeholders who own, or are responsible for the management of the land, in the Fire Management Area. To achieve this, FMACs are required to produce fire protection plans under Section 20 of the *Fire Service Act 1979*.

These plans are more commonly known as Bushfire Risk Management Plans (BRMPs). The bushfire risk identification and analysis process used in these plans is guided by the National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines (NERAG).

The BRMPs identify priorities for the treatment of bushfire risk in each Fire Management Area and aim to coordinate and influence the treatment of bushfire risk. The BRMPs are strategic level plans and do not include all details of bushfire risk treatments but do identify which organisations or individuals are responsible for implementing them. FMACs prepare a written report at least annually for the SFMC on the progress of implementation.

These plans are fundamental to the identification of priority areas for the implementation of the whole-of-government Fuel Reduction Program and community development programs.

Fuel Reduction Program

The Tasmanian Government's Fuel Reduction Program is a first for Australia, it is a whole-of government bushfire risk management program using a tenure blind approach based on a combination of sound research, computer modelling and community inputs. A tenure blind approach means we are responding collaboratively to the bushfire risk by priority using the resources of all fire agencies.

Launched in the 2014-15 financial year, the Program is in its sixth year of operation. The Program is underpinned by the Principles of the Tasmanian Vegetation Fire Management Policy (SFMC), that guide Program planning and implementation. The program measures strategic success by the

reduction of relative risk, not by hectares burnt, which fails to give any realistic measure of reduced bushfire risk to communities.

Relative risk measures how bushfires will impact communities, and how it is reduced by fuel reduction activities and unwanted bushfires. It is therefore a useful tool to help with the identification of locations where targeted fuel reduction treatments will reduce bushfire risk, and to measure the effectiveness of fuel reduction treatments.

The overarching objectives of the Fuel Reduction Program are:

- Maximise the bushfire risk reduction benefit to Tasmanian communities while valuing social and environmental functions and benefits.
- Engage with and educate the Tasmanian community to improve understanding and participation in bushfire risk management.
- Work collaboratively across agencies, tenures and key stakeholders in planning and implementation.
- Build long-term capacity and capability in fuel reduction.

The Program is well supported by the Tasmanian Government with additional fire crews and mechanical treatment officers announced this year. The Fuel Reduction Program through the successful coordination of the three major fire management agencies in Tasmania, has to date enabled over 600 strategic fuel reduction treatments to be undertaken, significantly reducing bushfire risk in many areas of Tasmania.

During 2018-19 the direct community benefit and value of fuel reduction burning was significantly highlighted during the 2019 bushfires. Annual bushfire risk re-analysis work has shown that the state-wide risk has reduced by 4% over the last 4 years, a notable decrease at the whole of state scale. At the time of this analysis (October 2018), state-wide relative risk was at 86.2%, the lowest it had been in 15 years and on track to meet the Fuel Reduction Program 2022-23 target of 80%.

Community Bushfire Protection Planning

TFS Community Protection Planning is a national award-winning emergency management, community protection and resilience building initiative. The planning process involves:

- Comprehensive bushfire risk assessment
- Community engagement and consultation
- Stakeholder consultation
- Investigation and analysis
- Field assessment and survey
- Bushfire modelling, prediction and assessment
- Drafting maps and plans.

An analysis of predicted fire impact, together with social and physical geography, allows the planning team to develop a risk management response to best suit the characteristics of a community.

Community protection planning is working with communities, stakeholders, and partner agencies in the development and implementation of risk management strategies, including Protection Plans, Response Plans, and Mitigation Plans. The bushfire risk identification and analysis process used in Community Protection Planning is guided by the National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines (NERAG).

Protection plans enhance the safety of Tasmanians by providing community members with local emergency planning advice and information, including the location of shelters of last resort called 'nearby safer places'.

To date 126 Bushfire Protection Plans and Response plans covering Tasmania's highest risk communities have been developed to date, and 17 Mitigation Plans for at-risk communities and specific assets have also been developed.

Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods

The TFS Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhood program focuses on building a 'shared responsibility' approach to bushfire preparedness through recognising that individuals, communities and the TFS all play a part.

The program's aim is to build resilience and capacity in bushfire prevention and preparedness in Tasmanian communities most at-risk to bushfire through a sustainable community development approach. Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods is an award-winning research and evidence-based program and has been a collaborative approach between the University of Tasmania and the TFS.

The Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program has been operating for six years. In 2018-19 the program delivered over 120 community activities, attended by almost 7 000 community members in bushfire-prone areas.

Research conducted in 2016 found that Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods community members were more likely to have completed bushfire survival plans and prepared their homes for bushfire. In addition, when threatened by bushfire in January 2016, they demonstrated that they were prepared to take appropriate action safely.

Bushfire-Ready Schools

Bushfire-Ready Schools is a TFS bushfire safety initiative. Its objective is to promote community resilience to bushfire, through supporting education centres in bushfire-prone areas to manage their bushfire risk.

This is important to the TFS because:

- School children are a vulnerable section of our community;
- Schools are a key community asset, often central to a community; and
- Schools have a duty of care to provide a safe workplace for staff and students.

As of May 2019, all Department of Education schools in Tasmania had been visited by TFS, assessed for their bushfire vulnerability, had emergency plans developed and provided with tailored advice on strategies to mitigate bushfire risk. Private schools are now opting to participate in the program.

Red Hot Tips

The SFMC Red Hot Tips program is aimed at landholders and land managers who are responsible for large tracts of land in rural areas of Tasmania. The program educates, engages and supports landholders and land managers to actively manage their bushfire risk; encouraging collaborative vegetation fire management and ecological sustainability across the landscape.

The second round of funding has just commenced for this program, with revised outcomes and program deliverables, focusing strongly on providing tools and support to landholders to increase their confidence in conducting planned burning activities.

Red Hot Tips promotes a ‘bushfire resilient rural community’ that:

- Understands the bushfire risk that affects them and others within their community
- Has capacity to take appropriate and informed action to reduce the bushfire risk, including planning for and conducting fuel reduction burning on their properties
- Has committed to necessary resources required before, during and after a bushfire
- Are ready to appropriately protect themselves, their assets and livelihoods
- Work together to assist each other reduce the bushfire risk and prepare for disasters
- Understand and welcome processes for recovery after a bushfire
- Form partnerships with emergency services, local authorities, industry and organisations to ensure activities are informed by local knowledge.

The program:

- Provides a central point of contact for landholders and land managers on all matters relating to bushfire risk
- Supports collaborative vegetation fire management activities across land tenures, thorough facilitation, training and stakeholder management; and
- Provides opportunity for experienced landholders and land managers to provide mentoring and support within their communities.

The program facilitators will have a key role in stakeholder engagement, fostering relationships between landholders and land managers, government agencies and industry to prepare for and undertake vegetation fire management activities, particularly where bushfire risk is identified across boundaries. These activities may include, but are not limited to;

- Conducting planned burning
- Demonstration burns and case study burns
- Online resources, including video
- Field days
- Construction and maintenance of fire breaks
- Training in fire management (face to face and online); and
- Developing fire management and burn plans.

The initial program worked with nine groups over a three-year period, including 60 businesses and 121 individuals. The program delivered a total of 16 case study burns and facilitated 12 training workshops. The program provided participants with the required skills and confidence to undertake planning and burning. Over 78% of participants have undertaken planned burning activities on their properties since completing the program.

The farming community, who manage and own large tracts of land in Tasmania, have been asking for further support and the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Management has acted on this by providing a second round of funding; which will provide a more comprehensive program to address individual needs.

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Implementation of successful bushfire risk management programs relies on stakeholders having a sound understanding of bushfire risk and the methods to mitigate risk. The SFMC is committed to building and supporting public and private sector partnerships and collaboration.

One of the ways SFMC maintain these networks is through Network Events. These events foster relationships and promote knowledge sharing and collaboration between the public and private sectors involved in vegetation fire management. These networks allow stakeholders to understand and appreciate each other's business models and bushfire management challenges.

Network Events are held regularly around the state. Each event is based on a different topic relating to vegetation fire management. Some of the events to date have included forums on bushfire risk, research and innovation and presentations from the AFAC Centre of Excellence for Prescribed Burning. SFMC has hosted a planned burning field day to educate and engage with the farming community collectively on how to conduct planned fuel reduction burning. SFMC also regularly communicates with stakeholders through newsletters and targeted communication methods.

The SFMC takes a collaborative approach to policy development. As mentioned, SFMC is legislated to develop a state vegetation fire management policy that provides guidance to enable the safe and effective conduct of vegetation fire management activities in Tasmania. In 2009 a policy was written responding to bushfire inquiries and audit reports, prepared wholly within SFMC. The policy met the needs of the fire agencies on SFMC but had little awareness or buy-in from other stakeholders. By 2016 the policy was due for an overhaul. A daring approach was taken to have stakeholders develop a new policy.

The process involved over 190 stakeholders at several policy development and consultation stages, including a key workshop where the policy scope was defined. Participants at this workshop were a diverse group with strongly divergent views including fire agencies; conservation activists; forest industry advocates; public health officials; farmers; scientists; and traditional landowners.

Whole Systems Theory was applied in workshops to develop principles and strategies that are now set out in the Policy. The process has had extraordinary outcomes. The interactions across the participants resulted in an engaged community and a policy that has ownership by all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The SFMC consider that the Tasmanian Government's model and support arrangements to be effective. Due to collaborative policy and planning, cross tenure fuel mitigation programs and capacity building through community development and education, Tasmania is comprehensively reducing the risk of bushfire; and monitoring and evaluation clearly demonstrates this.

The model is strategic, and its integrated focus is a good foundation for an integrated whole-of-government approach which other states of Australia could benefit from.

Moving forward, it is important to ensure an ongoing commitment to reducing bushfire risk, which may be fuel reduction burning, mechanical fuel treatments or education.

The SFMC will continue to grow mitigation programs, including strategic actions across planning, establishing a network of planned and maintained firebreaks across the state (all tenure), and a concerted focus on maintaining open and accessible road/tracks; strategically located water resources; all actions that reduce the cost of firefighting.

The Tasmanian experience clearly shows that strategic burning, and using a measure of relative risk, will deliver much better outcomes than concentrating on area burnt. It is imperative that the delivery of any program needs to be delivered through a whole of Government approach, including industry and the broader community.

It is important that all levels of Government and industry develop nationally effective monitoring and evaluation processes to enable efficient and effective measurement of cost and outputs, and what return on investment for outcomes is delivered. By doing this we should then be able to see private sector buy in, an example of this could be a reduction on insurance premiums over time.

Lessons learnt from Tasmania show a community engagement program, with multiple communication methods, leads to an engaged and an informed community. In Tasmania, this principle has been adopted in landholder capacity building programs, and engagement programs from School, peri urban, coastal, to the largest landholders the rural community.

Climate change experts are informing us that there will be more bushfires, driven by extreme weather events.

To do nothing is not an option.

We wish the Bushfire Commission all the best in its endeavours and welcome their findings.