

Submission Number: NND.001.00967

Submission Of: Penelope Margaret Wells

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Private Forests Tasmania & Tasmanian Forests and Forest Products Network

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The Tasmanian Forests and Forest Products Network (TFFPN) and Private Forests Tasmania (PFT) provided complementary submissions on behalf of the Tasmanian forest industry to the Cronstedt review of the management of bushfires during the 2018-19 fire season. While the material in these two submissions was compiled in the context of the Cronstedt Review's Terms of Reference, and were related to the 2018-19 fire season in Tasmania, much of their respective content is relevant to the 2020 Bushfire Royal Commission. In that context we offer extracts from the two submissions here for consideration in a national context. We have provided this jointly within the one submission demonstrating the collaborative approach adopted within the Tasmanian forestry sector on matters of strategic and statewide significance.

Extracts from TFFPN 2019 submission relevant to this question:

"Network Members acknowledge that for the most part the January 2019 fires arose from natural causes and that the response task was significant and complex. In addition, Network Members recognise that Tasmania's three Fire Agencies are contemporary and capable professional institutions with a strong track record of protecting Tasmania from the impacts of unplanned fire.

This submission is provided by Network Members with some elaboration on supportive themes and acknowledgement of the calibre of the existing fire agency services. However, this submission assumes that most of this support is well understood and that a greater focus on opportunities for improvement is more appropriate to the current agenda."

"Network Members acknowledge communication as a key pillar of fire response and fully support the central coordination of information through the Tasmania Fire Service Web portal. Further, the deployment of standardised advice levels and media protocols is supported."

"Network Members are very supportive of the interagency Incident Management Team protocol provided access is available to the necessary information regarding assets under management. Further, Network Members promote the active engagement of the commercial forest sector within interagency Incident Management Teams and propose to facilitate a 'Forest Industry Liaison Officer'." [Note this proposal has since been successfully implemented].

"It is entirely appropriate that reciprocal protocols are maintained for the sharing of resources at an interstate and international level. However, the points raised (elsewhere) regarding 'wet versus dry' firefighting apply here, particularly in so far as it relates to expensive aircraft.

Additionally, Network Members contend that the commercial forest sector is also a significant source of fire suppression resources with significant training and experience in managing bushfires, evidenced by the table below that details resources available from the private (non-fire agency) commercial forest sector. Note this excludes Sustainable Timber Tasmania.

Class 3	Class 5	Class 6	Personnel
6	14	21	103

Currently some Network Members have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Tasmania Fire Service that goes some way to recognising the industry's capacity detailed above. However, it is apparent to all Network Members that an industry wide MOU (in Tasmania) may deliver material capacity improvements for a future fire response and can address a breadth of issues including hard assets, forest asset information, human resources, training and financial matters."

Extracts from PFT 2019 submission relevant to this question:

"PFT staff noted that community messaging was constant during the bushfires and appeared to be working well. The most effective forms of messaging were through ABC radio and news 24, the TFS website and through call outs by phone and door knocking by police and TFS. These efforts made through all these forms of media should be commended, encouraged and built on in the future."

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

Extracts from TFFPN 2019 submission relevant to this question:

"Network Members acknowledge that for the most part the January 2019 fires arose from natural causes. The resultant bushfires were appropriate for management by an interagency Incident Management Team.

However, Network members consider that the response to some of the bushfires could have been enhanced through clear procedures and

established processes providing advanced approval for fire management activities such as deployment of heavy machinery in sensitive areas, including reserve and conservation areas, allowing a more timely response.”

“Network Members report a low level of understanding and/or acknowledgement regarding the value of commercial forests in both the management directions of all interagency Incident Management Teams, and communication to the public. This statement is based on a long-held view arising well before the January 2019 fires. Subsequently, it is felt decisions may be made in accordance with an inaccurate hierarchy of potential loss value, despite the private forest industry supporting fire agencies with the same fire service levies as other stakeholders. Therefore, Network Members suggest a review of the economic consequence criteria of the Tasmanian Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines to determine if it reflects the appropriate value of commercial forest assets. The Network Members stand ready to assist with this process and could, for example, prepare a simple ready reckoner for future value assessments.” [NB ready reckoner has since been developed].

“With respect to operational matters, Network Members report that the risk appetite from Incident Management Teams was too cautious. This report is evidenced by occasions where there was a blanket instruction to remove all fire crews due to weather forecasts when many crews had the option to work on black edges and further advance efforts towards ‘dry firefighting’.”

“Network Members recognise the value in strategic fuel management. However, the private forest sector also recognises the costs associated with this preventative strategy. Whilst supportive of the role of fuel reduction programs Network Members would also contend that the practice of commercial forestry is itself a preventative strategy in so far as removing fuel, providing a road network for access, and resources for an effective bushfire response. The January 2019 fires are a great example of outcomes possible when these factors aren’t involved, and specifically the issues arising from limited access in forested areas not subject to commercial forestry.”

Extracts from PFT 2019 submission relevant to this question:

“PFT is aware that actual events and those reported by stakeholders often contradict and that landowners often do not have all the facts or understand all circumstances, leading to misunderstandings and issues. With this in mind, and being aware that authorities involved with the firefighting activities dispute at least some of the following, PFT has summarised feedback from its stakeholders relevant to this term of reference.

PFT stakeholders reported that some fires were ignited by lightning in reserves which subsequently moved out of reserves to impact public and private forests and other privately and publically owned assets, including the Southwood mill facilities. Stakeholders report that privately owned assets, including people willing and able to fight fires and heavy equipment such as bulldozers made available to fight fires were assembled near the initial fires in reserves and were well placed to extinguish fires while they were small enough to readily control. Stakeholders reported that such a response was prevented by the reserve manager and/or TFS. Prevention included denying access to reserves, denying bulldozers the ability to drive over pavement (needing to be floated over pavement, requiring long delays) to access fires, and the prevention of privately managed fuel reduction burns ahead of the fire front. Stakeholders consider the prevention of private firefighting efforts resulted in the Riveaux fire threatening communities, burning private and public production forest and the Southwood mill sites. In other regions stakeholders report the prevention of their firefighting activities resulted in the loss of privately owned forest and non-forest assets.”

“...some comments from stakeholders and staff related to the accuracy of some information on the TFS website. Apparent lags in updating the burn front impeded accurate reporting to government on damage to private and public forest assets and impeded accurate info to landowners in the fire path. Others indicated that different parts of the TFS website gave conflicting information on status (watch and act, vs ‘fire going’), which caused unnecessary panic, evacuations and water usage.”

“In addition, stakeholders reported that:

- Fire fighters from Victoria ask if dry lightning storms are going to be more prevalent can Tasmania adopt the Victorian model of immediately flying the storm path and bombing early fire spots with fire retardants.
- Excessive focus by fire authorities on protecting buildings (including low value outbuildings) over valuable forestry estates. Landowners report significant efforts to save relatively low value buildings while valuable forest assets are not protected, in some cases against landowner’s wishes.
- There appeared to be lack of collaboration from fire authorities in using landowner and forester knowledge of local areas/roads/access/assets etc., which may have been exacerbated by lack of a mechanism to engage with private landowners, e.g. with equipment and personnel. Also, coordination with property level fire management plans that include mapped access to water (dams and rivers via existing roads) and asset protection priorities. Some landowners propose a more formal mechanism for fire authorities to attain property fire management plans (e.g. leave in recognisable place such as metal drum, at property entrance). Firefighting may be further facilitated by the development and provision of more property level fire management plans being made available to fire authorities.”

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Extracts from TFFPN 2019 submission relevant to this question:

“Network Members recognise that establishing values of forest assets for inclusion in any hierarchy of priorities for a fire response is necessary and challenging. To resolve this, Network Members propose a structured inclusion into future interagency Incident Management Teams of a ‘Forest Industry Liaison Officer’ whom will be able to assist with matters pertaining to commercial forests on behalf of the entire forest industry.” [Note that this proposal has since been successfully implemented]

“Network Members support the use of aviation services for part of an integrated fire response. Aviation services are naturally well suited to reconnaissance and assisting remote area work. However, Network Members recognise that aviation resources are very expensive and are not well suited to all fire responses. Further, Network Members recognise that there is an increase in the availability and deployment of aviation resources and recommend that fire agencies undertake a review of the effectiveness of these resources to ensure all future deployment of aviation resources is fit for purpose and efficient.”

“As a separate point, and at the highest level across all fires, Network Members also submit that the firefighting directed by the interagency Incident Management Team could be characterised as ‘wet firefighting’. That is, firefighting focused on the use of water as the primary control agent, and water deployed during ‘business hours’ or ‘daylight hours’ via aerial and ground-based means. Conversely, Network Members submit that an alternative ‘dry firefighting’ approach should be integrated in the fire response to provide more effective control in terms of timing, safety and cost. That is, firefighting is focused into the cooler evening and night time and is focused on the construction of mineral earth breaks and backburning. The forest industry has significant expertise and success in this style of firefighting in the past.”

“Road Access

Network Members note that road networks are impacted from fire and that safety must be actively managed in providing access into the road network after the fire is suppressed. However, it is also noted that the assessment process and remedial actions arising from such assessments is an onerous task and due to limited resources must be prioritised. Once again, it is appropriate that decision makers are fully informed and, in this case, recognise some of these road networks as critical freight routes for commercial forestry. This observation again supports the proposal of Network Members for interagency Incident Management Teams to appoint an ‘Forest Industry Liaison Officer’ including for ‘after fire’ matters such as road network re-entry. Also, the requirement to work rapidly with road owners and stakeholders, such as a local government, must be emphasised.

Training

Network Members understand there are different minimum standards for firefighters between agencies and the forest industry generally. In some instances, this difference required some firefighting resources to be dismissed from fire ground management and without proper explanation or justification. The subject of minimum training requirements as well as practical pathways for basic fire awareness to trained fire fighter needs to be urgently clarified to enable the forest industry to respond before the 2019/20 season. As disclosed above, the subject of training could be appropriately addressed in a proposed industry wide MOU.

Standards for Equipment

Similarly to training, there is currently no formal minimum standards for equipment deployed on fire grounds nor is there an established benchmark to provide consistency between fire agencies. This presents uncertainty for the private sector and risks fire fighter safety. Once again, this could be appropriately addressed in a proposed industry wide MOU.”

Additional comments received from TFFPN members post Cronstedt Review:

“It is worth noting that bushfires started by arson posed the greatest impact to the community/forest industry during the 2019-20 fire season in Tasmania. Stronger penalties must apply to those convicted of arson, to send a clear message that this behaviour is totally unacceptable. Another issue identified during the 2019-20 fire season in Tasmania are fires started by roadside slashing machinery, as currently there are no standardised processes for mitigating the risks of fire on roadsides at Local or State Government level.”

Extracts from PFT 2019 submission relevant to this question:

“Recommendations:

- a) Commit to identifying and actioning on site firefighting methods to speed up first attack and more effective rapid control of fires in remote locations.
- b) Clarify, using transparent protocols shared by fire managers, methods for a more timely responses to firefighting strategies.
- c) Strengthen protocols for consultation with local experienced firefighters and improve mechanisms and transparent protocols for collaboration with landowners.
- d) That the TFS host public information and feedback sessions to improve communication on how the fires started and were responded to, including information on the work, health and safety requirements of people and equipment on the fire ground and the nature of fires in Tasmania that impact control measures implemented elsewhere (e.g. the difference in weather and fire ignition patterns effecting the ability to follow a fire front with firefighting aircraft and meaningfully respond to lightning ignitions in Victoria and Tasmania).”

“Recommendations:

- a) Acknowledging the difficulties with smoke and local weather conditions impeding aerial reconnaissance, look for innovative methods to improve, where possible, the accuracy of the burned area on the TFS website.
- b) Ensure the TFS website contains consistent information.”

“Recommendations:

- a) Review the use of aircraft to follow the track of lightning storms with a view to enhancing i) rapid first response (e.g. with fire retardant) and locate and map fires with infra-red mapping and ii) better targeting of aerial deployment of experienced remote areas fire fighters.
- b) Review mechanisms for fire authorities’ engagement with land managers to enable better utilisation property level fire-fighting plans, priorities of assets for protection from fire, and access to resources, including through the use of regional fire management plans (Developed in consultation with local land owners, TFS and public land managers).”

“Fire is a major risks to the private forestry sector. PFT commends fuel reduction burns and the capacity to conduct them, and supports any further investment. PFT notes and commends the Tasmanian government’s coordinated program of fuel reduction burns across the State.

Recommendation:

- a) Improve cooperation with landowners to implement more effective and timely fuel reduction burning programs at the local level.”

“Engagement between fire authorities and landowners could be improved to better engage with landowner assets and to improve communication and develop a common understanding of roles and actions undertaken during firefighting.”

“Salvage operations

PFT believes there is a useful line of work in developing the capacity to identify and facilitate rapid salvage of burned forests. Salvage operations allow landowners a return on burned forests during the post fire recovery phase. This can support more general land-management actions such as road maintenance and these activities help support the forestry supply chain that is generally placed under pressure post fire – particularly given the reduction in harvestable forest area and forestry activities immediately post fire. Salvage of structural and appearance grade wood needs to occur quickly to avoid log quality downgrades. Salvage is not well developed in the Forest Practices Code risking unnecessary planning delays and costs. Salvage of downed wood can further support salvage activities and is also not well covered in the forest practices code. Salvage of downed wood could increase the area of cost effective salvage operations and will likely be a requirement for bioenergy harvests.

Recommendations:

- a) Develop methods to identify areas suited to salvage (e.g. aerial imagery of fire intensity and canopy characteristics with forest type and age).
- b) Enhance salvage provisions of the Forest Practices Code and/or associated planning tools for standing and downed wood to facilitate rapid planning and responses.
- c) Post fire support mechanisms and assistance measures of government to include mechanisms to facilitate salvage operations.

Assessment of fire damaged forests

The private forest resource in the TFS burnt area boundary was 35 643 ha. Assessing damage and appropriate land management responses to

forests in this area will require a forester to visually assess areas at a cost to landowners.

Recommendation:

d) Post fire support mechanisms and assistance measures of government to include mechanisms to enable properties to be assessed for fire damage and owners to appropriately respond.”

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

To assist the Royal Commission to better understand the context of the above submission some background information on the Tasmanian Forests and Forest Products Network (TFFPN) and Private Forests Tasmania (PFT) is provided here:

Tasmanian Forests and Forest Products Network

About the TFFPN:

The TFFPN provides an inclusive, open and transparent platform on industry matters for all those people who either work within or who support a productive, sustainable and profitable forest industry in Tasmania. To achieve this the role of the TFFPN includes:

- Being a communication hub;
- Providing informed policy advice to government and the industry;
- Providing a focal point for Government to communicate high level issues of common concern across the Network;
- Fostering Research and Development in the industry;
- Promoting skills development and career paths across the industry;
- Providing a linkage point across the industry to coordinate policy, government responses and other matters of common interest;
- Community engagement and education, providing information about the issues in the industry and building support for those who work in it;
- Promoting the Brand; and
- Building partnerships and align interests.

More information on the TFFPN can be found here <https://www.tffpn.com.au/>

Specific TFFPN Members Represented in this Submission

- Forico Pty Limited
- Sustainable Timber Tasmania
- PF Olsen Australia
- AKS Forest Solutions
- Timberlands Pacific Pty Ltd
- Reliance Forest Fibre
- Norske Skog

Individually and collectively, these stakeholders (Network Members) have been significantly impacted by unplanned fires in the 2018/19 period. With specific reference to the January 2019 fires impacts for these growers and managers are summarised as;

- 3,500 ha of hardwood plantations;
- 500 ha of softwood plantations;
- 35,000 ha of private natural forest; and
- 35,000 ha of public natural forests (Sustainable Timber Tasmania).

At point of sale these impacted forests represent a value to the Tasmanian economy in excess of \$100M.

In addition, Network Members report other impacts beyond the primary forest assets including;

- Neville Smith Products and Ta Ann processing mills at the Southwood site;
- Tahune Airwalk;
- Warra Research Trial;
- Weld River Bridge;
- Numerous job losses/forced leave due to forest operation closures;
- Expenses and logistics associated with harvest operation relocations;
- Additional transport costs associated with road closures; and
- Long and short term impact on forest operation planning and scheduling.

On the basis of impacts outlined above, and Network Members experience in the management of fire, the TFFPN is well qualified to present this submission.

Private Forests Tasmania

Private Forests Tasmania (PFT) is a statutory authority established to promote, foster and assist the private forestry sector on forestry matters. PFT provides strategic and policy advice to Government on private forestry issues and represents Tasmanian private forestry owner's interests. PFT works with the Tasmanian private forestry sector and has over 1000 stakeholders that we interact with regularly. During the 2018-19 Tasmanian bushfires PFT provided government with information on the forest types and areas of private forest within the Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) burned area map, disseminated information on government support for fire effected areas, facilitated the provision of information and expertise needed to respond to the bushfires to landowners and is reimbursing the Private Forest Service Levy for fire effected areas in Forest Practices Plans (FPPs). PFT considers bushfire to be a major threat to the private forest resource and supports any effort to prevent or control bushfires. More about PFT can be found here: www.pft.tas.gov.au

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