

**Submission Number: NND.001.01123**

**Submission Of: Dean Sheehan**

**Your Details**

Email address:  
Phone:  
Preferred means of contact: Email  
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? Sustainable Timber Tasmania

**Your Submission**

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?  
As an AFAC member organisation, Sustainable Timber Tasmania (STT) provides and receives interstate support through the National Resource Sharing Centre under the conditions of the Agreement for Interstate Assistance. Working together as a jurisdiction with the Tasmania Fire Service and Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service, STT provided a number of firefighters who assisted with frontline firefighting as well as backburning and patrol operations. Coordination of resources was challenging due to a number of issues, but always expected in such a dynamic environment and the overall comment would be it worked very well. The coordination between states through State Liaison Coordinators worked really well, and as a resource providing agency not directly involved in coordination or transfer of resources, STT was still well briefed and received regular communications.  
STT staff have reported how well they were received upon arrival and looked after whilst on their deployment. The safety messages provided prior to departure, and briefings on site by competent staff was very much appreciated and to a high standard.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?  
Early in the response Tasmanian crews were involved in asset protection and evacuations. As trained forest firefighters asset protection is not a trained skill and several firefighters were put in extremely dangerous and life-threatening situations. Whilst these firefighters were experienced and competent operators who performed to an exceptionally high standard (they were also well briefed of the potential situation they were entering and given the option to leave – which they declined), they were exposed to situations they have no formal training in. Compounding this was the involvement with evacuating an elderly person who later passed away from her injuries. As a jurisdiction, Tasmania implemented a process for future deployments to be tasked to areas where they would be undertaking roles within their training and skill set. It is expected and known that bushfires change dramatically and quickly and from time to time firefighters will be exposed to unfamiliar situations and STT is taking steps to modify training to provide awareness around asset protection and structural firefighting, but skill sets must be recognised and the resources tasked appropriately – for everyone's safety.  
In the situation of the elderly person passing away, crews were debriefed and contact quickly made with STT's Fire Management Manager to provide briefing of the developing situation. This was very timely and allowed Critical Incident Management to be activated in a timely manner and families contacted. However, Media could have been managed better. They were too close to crews at times, seeking information rather than being kept away to allow the crews much needed privacy.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?  
Preparation  
The Agreement for Interstate Assistance, with confirmed conditions, between states and territories could be signed and approved prior to upcoming fire seasons. This would streamline the administration and governance process outside of the short-term notice and focusing on assessing local situations, determining a response capacity and gaining final internal approvals before committing resources interstate. Continued government support of cross agency agreements and interoperability arrangements between government departments. Such arrangements increase resource capacity in peak times and are invaluable in not only providing assistance to the response but also in providing opportunity to manage the fatigue of dedicated emergency management staff during protracted events.  
Firefighters are critical to putting fires out. Tenure blind strategically located and maintained firebreaks, tracks and trails provide access for responding, patrolling, rehabilitation and recovery crews. Forestry organisations – government and industrial – have been instrumental in the construction and maintenance of such access through general forest and fire management operations. Through industry restructures, or competing financial priorities, the forest industry (and some government departments) have been challenged financially in recent times to provide adequate maintenance programs to existing access, and very limited to the construction of new. Funding programs would greatly assist with the upgrade, construction and maintenance of fireground access. Complimenting the improved vehicular access would be the construction and maintenance of identified and marked water points and water access.

Mitigation  
Fuel management is critical to bushfire mitigation. The Tasmanian State Government has financially supported a tenure blind Statewide Fuel Management program jointly undertaken by Tasmania Fire Service, Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service and Sustainable Timber Tasmania. Such programs in all states and territories should be recognised, implemented, supported and funded on a continuing basis to assist in mitigating risk to communities, critical infrastructure, industry and natural values. Mechanical fuel management/modification methods (e.g. slashing, mulching, biomass) in addition to burning should also be considered. The need and importance for such programs only increases during a time of climate change and targeted funding would greatly assist in identifying suitable and appropriate methods.  
Forest management contributes to bushfire mitigation on many levels. Various methods of forest harvesting manages fuels through modifying, reducing or removing and provides a mosaic of treated fuels in the landscape that can greatly assist in reducing or removing bushfire intensity and increasing firefighting effectiveness. The roads constructed to provide harvesting access double up as access for firefighting operations.

The young regenerated forests also provide a patchwork of modified fuels to reduce or remove fire intensity.

#### Response

It is becoming increasingly regular that the resource capacity of states and territories is stretched to the point of requiring external assistance at a state, national or international level. The National Resource Sharing Centre, inter-agency agreements, interoperability arrangements and national/international agreements are important to ensuring the continued access to those external resources if and when required to provide response to developing or established major events.

Continued commitment to funding for state owned forestry organisations to provide an appropriate level of fire management community service is essential to ensuring these organisations are in a financial position to build, maintain and improve their fire management capability and capacity whilst at the same time assisting government agencies on private and reserved lands.

Federal support and funding of the National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC) contracted fleet across Australia should continue. Consideration of a national aircraft plan for allocation and deployment is required. Fire seasons occur at different stages of the year across the country and increasingly these seasons are overlapping creating potential competition between states and territories for the aircraft resources.

Early detection and a rapid weight of attack is vital for preventing escalating fire events. Various detection methods across the country are practiced such as fire towers, aerial flights, community reporting and patrols. In an age of technology new methods must be researched or further developed to assist with the earliest detection possible, such as satellites and cameras.

#### Recovery

Forest managers are central to the recovery of a forest impacted by bushfire. Seed collection programs undertaken by the forest industry provide a seed bank to aerial sow land following harvesting treatments, but also for forests requiring an onsite seed source from extreme intensity bushfires. Rehabilitation of the land to protect environmental values such as water quality and erosion control are undertaken to standards developed by the forest industry. Removal of hazardous trees by trained and experienced forest industry personnel allow the re-opening of roads previously closed due to unsafe surroundings from bushfire impact.

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

Sustainable Timber Tasmania is a Government Business Enterprise with responsibilities for managing approximately 820,000 hectares of Tasmanian public production forest. STT undertakes forestry operations on this land and sells forest products. STT's purpose is to be a customer-focused and financially viable forest products and services provider, sustainably managing Permanent Timber Production Zone land for multiple-use as a community asset.

Fire management is an integral part of STT's business and is conducted according to the legislative requirements that regulate bushfire and land management and within the frameworks and standards that govern STT's business in general.

STT is a signatory to the Inter-Agency Bushfire Management Protocol with the Tasmania Fire Service and the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service and a member of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC), the Australian and New Zealand Forest Fire Management Group (FFMG), the Australian and New Zealand Rural and Land Management Group (RLMG), the State Fire Management Council (SFMC) and the Tasmanian Forest Industry Fire Management Committee (FIFMC).

STT has capacity of over 200 trained and fit firefighters, made up of staff and contractors. Through these resources STT conducts fuel reduction burning on its own land, provides resources to assist the TFS and PWS programs, undertakes up to 160 regeneration burns annually and provides firefighting resources within Tasmania and interstate. The fire management fleet consists of 15 Class 3 heavy tankers, 12 dedicated Class 5 tankers and 68 Class 5/6 slip on tankers and 9 aerial helitorches, which have also been built and sold by STT to numerous organisations across Australia. Fire detection is provided through a network of 16 fire towers across the north, east and south of the state, and daily aerial spotter flights in the north west and west coast.

With these major fire management responsibilities in Tasmania and representation in national forums, STT believes it is qualified to provide a submission for consideration to the Royal Commission, and in addition to the questions presented above provide the following brief comments.

- Recognition of the human impact from firefighting – fatigue and mental health. Reviews to further understand and develop tools for management.
- Better understanding of the effectiveness of aircraft. Operational review to identify areas of improvement, alternative methods of application, ensure best use of resources.
- Ensure continuation of the new National Fire Danger Rating System development.
- We must ensure the skills and learnings of experienced prescribed burn practitioners are passed on. Build on the work already undertaken by the National Burning Project.
- Continued support for bushfire research, but research identified and driven by the fire management organisations.
- Recognising and promoting forest management as an effective, viable and appropriate form of bushfire mitigation and fuel management.
- Suggest care be taken with the establishment of a national accountability and reporting framework for natural disaster risk management (Terms of Reference (b)) Focus needs to be results driven but governance shouldn't impact on resources to a level that restricts the delivery of desired outcomes.
- Recommend the National Bushfire Management Policy Statement for Forests and Rangelands for reference.
- Recommend the paper published in the Australian Forestry Journal, Prescribed burning in south-eastern Australia: history and future directions <http://doi.org/10.1080/00049158.2020.1739883>

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