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“In Support of Progress” Newsletter

Of Fire and Flood

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The Summer fire review

The report of an Independent Review into the summer bushfires was released last week. The independent review was undertaken by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, and its findings raise significant concerns over the management skills within the Tasmanian Fire Service (the TFS).

The report has exposed the TFS management to be seriously lacking in some basic skills, particularly in the areas of co-ordination and communication – and trust.

At the outset, let me make two fundamental points:

Point 1

Fighting bushfires is a totally different proposition and requires a different skillset than fighting urban fires. The TFS obviously has the skills and capacity to respond to urban situations. And there is no criticism of it at this level.

However, using urban tactics to manage fires in remote areas - essentially a wait-and-see approach – doesn't cut it in the bush, where preventative measures should be of paramount importance. Putting urban crews and volunteers into fighting bushfires without the necessary training is of limited value in fighting these fires once they take hold. As is aerial bombing in forested areas.

Chanting the chant “hit them early hit them hard” is all very well and sounds tough, but talking the talk did not translate into walking the walk, in fact just the opposite.

There are three firefighting bodies in the State, being the Tasmanian Fire Service, the STT (Forestry for short) field workforce and the Parks and Wildlife remote area firefighting crews.

The workforce in Parks and Wildlife and STT are basically land managers. They are in the bush on a permanent full-time basis, and have been trained in a range of bush-related skills, including fire prevention as well as remote area fire-fighting. They do know what they are doing. They are professional in what they do, but are limited in what they can do by their employing agency outside their areas of land management control, unless asked to intervene.

Their capacity is further defined by their numbers. In Parks their numbers are ridiculously low, vacancies exist in the permanent workforce, and their casual (trained) workforce is diminishing. Departmental policy MUST be to boost these numbers, particularly the permanent crews, and ensure proper and continuing training. And similarly with the forest service.

Point 2

The troops on the ground are not in the gun here at all. They deserve the praise that is given them. But there is a difference when talking fire control. It's the difference between talking about the bravery of soldiers at the battle front, and the generals who conduct the war. Praise for the fire fighters is not an excuse for not querying the management capacity of the TFS, and yet the commentary to date would appear to have conflated this issue. “A comment on one of us is a comment on us all.” Management is keen to bask in this reflected glory.

The review makes 9 separate recommendations, all relating to what the TFS should have been doing years ago. Basically, the management skills within the TFS have been sadly lacking, and the review has highlighted this fact.

The immediate response from the Tasmanian Fire Service has been intriguing. It has said "In hindsight we could have done better", and "We have learnt from our experiences this year". That is simply not good enough. They knew at the time.

There was a serious disconnect between the crews on the ground and the TFS control centre. To cite some examples, as provided to the Review panel by the AWU:

- A water bomber collected water from a brown trout lake and was not allowed to release the water it was carrying.
- Air monitoring of hot spots was not provided at the Gell River fire, when asked for by the ground crews. The fire eventually escaped.
- Permission to punch through fire breaks in front of the fire on the Central Highlands fire was not given in good time, and fire breaks were not made as a consequence. The fire eventually escaped.
- Senior Parks personnel were removed from the Riveaux Road fire at an early stage against the advice of the ground crews to fight another fire. The fire eventually escaped.
- In one critical instance, air support was not given the radio frequencies of the ground crews, so they could not communicate with each other.

In what is seen as an extraordinary over-reaction, the TFS ground crews have now been grounded while new protocols are agreed to, amidst concerns that their absence will place the Tasmanian community at risk. It has by this action shown it had no understanding of the work of remote area fire-fighters, and exposed its own shortcomings by doing so.

TFS management have got nowhere to hide. After all, the Parks remote area crews are not grounded. So obviously appropriate protocols are already in place there. I would hate to think that in this management crisis, TFS management is endeavouring to deflect attention from its own shortcomings, and in a cynical ploy is using this as a power play for more cash and resources, and to consolidate its power over all fire-fighting activity.

At the moment, it has shown an absence of capacity to manage its own responsibilities in remote area firefighting, and the suggestion that all firefighting capacity should in future be run by the TFS must be rejected.

Floods

It's a bit like fire – we don't worry about it until it is upon us, and then we say we should have done things before this. "It's all very well in hindsight". Once again we are bearing witness to a flood season, with a period of drenching rain, rivers rising, and flood warnings given.

Obviously levees are a bulwark against flooding, and no doubt a lot of planning has been undertaken, and much consideration has been given – but once again, no action has been taken. It is always "Its just too hard".

I have no idea any more what it takes for Councils and State government to build levees, but like fire, we are more about concentrating on the disaster, rather than its mitigation. After all, nothing like a good drama to help focus the mind.