

Hydro Tasmania submission

Submission to the *‘Cronstedt
Review of the Management of
Bushfires during the 2018-19
Fire Season’*

May 2019



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1.0 Submission

Hydro Tasmania provides the following submission for the Review Panel's consideration, under the headings defined in the Terms of Reference.

1.1 The causes, chronology and response of the 2018-19 bushfires in Tasmania on and following 28 December 2018

Hydro Tasmania has no comment on this aspect of the review.

1.2 The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings

Four critical sources of information/communication and alerts used by Hydro Tasmania to manage our response to these fires were:

- TFS ALERTS LIST and ALERTS MAP website (for warning levels, fire ground extent)
- TAS ALERT website
- Bureau of Meteorology MetEye wind forecasts
- ABC emergency broadcasts

The above four information sources were continuously monitored by Hydro Tasmania staff, which allowed us to maintain situational awareness throughout the incident. During the incident, Hydro Tasmania staff secured live feeds from these web sources to support development of geographic information system (GIS) maps, to allow tracking of the proximity of the fire to our asset locations in near real-time. We appreciated access to this information and applaud the fact that these resources were made readily available.

Additionally, ABC community messaging was a useful way to calibrate the severity of fire information and potential impacts. In particular, when the fire front was in the vicinity of our assets (for example as the fire neared the township of Waddamana).

1.3 The timeliness and effectiveness of the fire response and management strategy

Priorities and Strategy

At each Statewide Fire Command briefing, the Incident Controller clearly stated the priorities to all present. Throughout the fire, there were a number of periods where critical infrastructure was appropriately listed as the top priority after life safety, which provided a strong signal to regional centres and planners to adjust their approach accordingly.

The major issue for critical infrastructure businesses during an event such as this is to continuously monitor fire behaviour, assess actual and potential impacts on generation assets, and on the energy system in Tasmania, and provide regular updates on critical infrastructure protection priorities to emergency services, and to those responsible for jurisdictional level management of energy supply.

Elements critical to the success of the above approach include:

1. Access to the twice daily state fire command briefings in Argyle Street;
2. Placing Emergency Liaison Officers in Regional Fire Operation Centres (relevant to our assets) to ensure close situational awareness and coordination of effort;
3. Regular and unimpeded access to Regional and State Planning Officers to feed information and critical infrastructure priorities; and
4. Access to the Statewide Incident Controller, when warranted, to present imminent threats to critical infrastructure.

Hydro Tasmania would like to acknowledge the TFS and Tasmania Police, as all four of the above elements worked seamlessly in this event. There were several occasions when fire response strategies were adjusted to support critical infrastructure protection. This was essential to protect individual assets that remain vital to Tasmania into the future and also to ensure continuity of energy security for the State during the incident. The Incident Management Team showed flexibility and agility to adapt their campaign according to shifting priorities, which is commendable.

Special mention goes to Commander Tony Cerritelli who twice convened special meetings between Hydro Tasmania, TasNetworks, the Incident Controller and Regional Fire Operations Centres to discuss emerging critical infrastructure threats and develop strategies to better understand and combat them.

Regarding element 2, the ability to place Emergency Management Liaison Officers in Regional Fire Operations Centres proved extremely valuable with regard to the impact on our situational awareness, approach to asset protection, and ability to liaise closely with TFS and TasNetworks and jointly problem solve. Again, this liaison model is fully supported and should continue, and Hydro Tasmania intends to strengthen our incident plans to ensure early consideration of same.

Water Releases

Hydro Tasmania is willing and able to make special water releases downstream of our dams to assist fire fighting efforts in such events. On this occasion releases down the Ouse River to assist TFS and landholders with river levels were requested and approved, but did not eventuate due to timing issues and changed fire behaviour. It is important to note that such releases need to be coordinated through Regional Fire Operation Centres and Statewide Fire Command as they have the ability to impact the fire area in both positive ways (providing elevated pools for refilling of tankers, or refuge areas for impacted fauna) and negative ways (flooding normal river crossing points).

1.4 The impact and effectiveness of fuel management programs in the fire affected areas on the management and containment of the fires

This fire event proved beyond doubt the value of extensive vegetation management programs undertaken by both Hydro Tasmania and TasNetworks. As well as protecting critical energy infrastructure, work done in vegetation management prior to this fire event assisted TFS in fire control activities by reducing fuel load in the vicinity of critical infrastructure, impeded the spread of the fires and improved asset resilience.

1.5 The effectiveness of state, regional and local command, control and co-ordination arrangements

From Hydro Tasmania's perspective, the command, control and coordination efforts of the emergency services during this event worked well. The use of WebEOC was key for us to stay informed on statewide developments, and to keep track of, and interact with staff around the state. The four elements highlighted in item 1.3 above shows how effective the AIIMS¹-based structures can be, and how they can facilitate close cooperation between agencies. The daily statewide fire briefings at 10am provided an opportunity for all agencies to share intelligence, maintain situational awareness, and liaise. In some cases, the corridor discussions with agency heads after each briefing were profound in their impacts on firefighting strategies, and personnel movements. This model of incident management is fully supported and should continue.

1.6 The effectiveness of the arrangements in place for requesting and managing interstate and international assistance and the significance of interstate and international assistance in managing the fires

Hydro Tasmania has no comment on this aspect of the review.

1.7 The use and effectiveness of aviation firefighting resources

It is the view of Hydro Tasmania that the aerial attack strategy employed to protect the transmission lines just north of Waddamana at the end of January had an extremely beneficial impact in protecting this critical north-south link within the Tasmanian transmission network. Based on information supplied by Hydro Tasmania and others, air resources were reallocated from other areas to protect the north-south link, once the criticality of the assets was understood, and when it was possible to prioritise asset protection without compromising higher priorities such as threat to life. Again, this showed the willingness of the TFS to receive advice from agencies managing critical infrastructure and adjust their approach.

Having seen the efficacy of aerial firefighting, our view is access to these critical resources should be a high priority for the next event.

It is worth noting for the record that the option of cloud seeding (to increase rainfall over the fire area) was raised by TFS and members of the public during the fires, in terms of considering all potential fire suppression options. Hydro Tasmania's cloud seeding program has ceased, and so we did not have access to the planes, pilots or materials available to cloud seed at the time.

¹ Australian Inter-service Incident Management System

It is also important to note that the clouds that are normally present in summer have different characteristics to those which present in May to October - the period in which Hydro Tasmania had previously conducted cloud seeding. We do not have any recent experience in completing summer cloud seeding operations. Further, our past experience is that mobilising for cloud seeding operations requires at least a month of effort prior to commencement and would be difficult to arrange at short notice.

However, Hydro Tasmania worked closely with TFS during the height of the bushfires to support their firefighting efforts and provided access to water from Shannon Lagoon and Lake Augusta at their request to help combat the fires. Releases down the Ouse River were also considered, as discussed in section 1.3

1.8 Other Matters

Hydro Tasmania has recognised two opportunities for improvement, as follows:

Hydro Tasmania access to roads closed to the public

Tasmania Police have formally agreed that under certain circumstances (such as the 2019 fires), Hydro Tasmania vehicles can be considered to have emergency vehicle status (EVS), to allow access to roads that are closed to the public. Hydro Tasmania has made the case that our 4WD vehicles are well equipped with communications, safety and recovery gear, our staff have appropriate training, and we have formal procedures to ensure staff safety under these circumstances. These arrangements ensure that Hydro Tasmania can access its power stations and infrastructure (as long as it is safe to do so) in the interests of maintaining energy security for the state.

During a major incident, communication between Tasmania Police and their divisional units, and any delegates they employ to supervise road closures and roadblocks, needs to ensure understanding of this EVS status. On a number of occasions during the 2019 fires Hydro Tasmania staff in badged vehicles were stopped at roadblocks by well-intentioned staff and prevented from reaching our power stations. This was a particular problem when non-Tasmania Police staff such as security contractors were staffing roadblocks, and took direction from their management structures, rather than directly from Tasmania Police. Such events frustrate our efforts to maintain the output of our power stations, and are unnecessary, unless the fire front poses an immediate threat during travel between the roadblock and the power station.

Hydro Tasmania notes that this problem also occurs when roads are closed due to snow and floods.

Hydro Tasmania recommends that Tasmania Police develop a more robust communication mechanism with personnel involved in road closures when critical infrastructure vehicles have EVS status. Hydro Tasmania would welcome the opportunity to work with Tasmania Police in developing this mechanism. This will minimise the chance of further unintended constraint at roadblocks, and ensure there are no impacts on the power system from such an administrative/procedural error.

Road Opening Post Fire Event

There were a few issues with reopening roads that had been closed during the fire. In one instance Tasmania Police opened a public road in the vicinity of Penstock Lagoon, which resulted in the public accessing camping areas (Hydro Tasmania land) that had not yet undergone burnt tree assessments, and hence had not been deemed safe.

The Scotts Peak Road, owned by Hydro Tasmania, was justifiably closed by Tasmania Police during the fire. However, it was cleared and deemed safe by Hydro Tasmania contractors after the fire, but remained closed for some time due to uncertainty over who had authority to open the road.

Hydro Tasmania recommends that agencies develop a protocol to open closed roads after such events. This ensures the appropriate safety assessments are completed, the road deemed safe, and clear lines of authority, with respect to decision-making, are developed. These issues are especially important for Hydro Tasmania as road access impacts our ability to operate our assets and also impacts on Hydro Tasmania's ability to safely manage sites for public use. Hydro Tasmania would welcome the opportunity to work with relevant authorities in developing this protocol, particularly for road access that impacts Hydro Tasmania assets.