



SUPPORT TASSIE'S TIMBER PEOPLE

Grass Roots Advocacy
for people, families and communities
who are supported by the Tasmanian Timber Industry.

Kelly Wilton
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INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO THE 2018-2019 TASMANIAN BUSHFIRES

SUBMISSION

KELLY WILTON

SUPPORT TASSIE'S TIMBER INDUSTRY

I'd like to firstly thank the Tasmanian government and the panel for conducting a review into the 2018-2019 Tasmanian Bushfires. I'd also like to acknowledge the hard work and selfless dedication of all those involved in fighting the fires, with special mention to all of the volunteers.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

My name is Kelly Wilton, and I run a Facebook page called "Support Tassie's Timber People". The page has been operating since 2011, and has almost 6000 followers. It initially opened as an information sharing platform for people involved in the timber industry, and as a means of support during the process of the Forestry (Intergovernmental) Agreement that occurred after the Triabunna wood chip mill was closed and sold to environmentalists. As a result of opening that page, I became a grass-roots advocate for people in the industry and a voice for those who, for various reasons, felt unable to share information or voice opinions themselves. I have organised and spoken at public rallies and lobbied government on various timber industry related issues. During the past 8 years, I have built up networks including all levels of government, the business community, many community groups and associations and of course, the timber industry.

I have built up trust with those who have followed my work, and support my Facebook page. I am often passed information from people who feel it should be public knowledge, or who raise questions they feel need to be asked publicly – but are unable to do so themselves, most often because of their employment. If I can get some verification or confirmation from a credible source, I use my name and my social media platform to be their voice, whilst maintaining the anonymity of the informant. Because of the networks I have established, I am usually able to get "unofficial" confirmation.

It has been because of this trust, that I was contacted by people who had great concerns about the Riveaux Road Bushfire, with information that I strongly feel needs full investigation.

RIVEAUX ROAD BUSHFIRE

Lightning strikes that occurred on the 15th January 2019 started several fires in Tasmania. As a staff member of Sustainable Timbers Tasmania was witnessing the lightning, he noticed a smoke sighting. He attended the fire and conducted an initial investigation, submitting a full report including the exact location of the fire which was behind a locked Parks and Wildlife gate, the size of the fire which was small enough that he could walk around, and machinery that would be needed to respond to the fire that was appropriate for the ground conditions. I am told that the perimeter of the fire was GPS tracked and submitted with the report. Parks and Wildlife crews were not deployed to respond to this fire until 3 days later. They were not equipped with the appropriate machinery as suggested in the initial report, (1 dozer and 1 excavator due to wet ground conditions) and there was a further delay in a fire fighting response while they waited for an excavator to be floated in. In the time from when the fire was first reported by the STT staff member as a small fire, to when a response was initiated by PWS 3 days later, the fire had grown and was already uncontrollable. Other fires had been sparked in the area and they eventually joined up to become the Riveaux Road Fire. The fire that was reported by the STT staff member was the first and closest to the populated areas of the Huon. Given the evidence that is given in this submission, there are several questions that must be answered.

- Were the other fires that joined up to become the Riveaux Road Fire, sparked by the one reported by the STT staff member?
- If that fire had been extinguished on the day it was first reported, would the fire event that followed have been stopped?
- Why did it take 3 days for Parks & Wildlife Services to deploy a response team?
- Was there inter-agency confusion/disagreement on land tenure that dictates which agency was responsible to respond to the fire?
- What are the procedures and protocols that restricted a fire fighting response from an agency other than the agency that has the land management tenure, and should these protocols and procedures be adjusted to allow a better faster response in future events?
- What protocol and procedural restrictions in fire fighting response in World Heritage Area's delayed a response due to the need for heavy tracked machinery?

INTRODUCTION

Some time around the 22nd or 23rd of January 2019, I was contacted by a person known to me who works within the timber industry. He was concerned about something, and wanted to know if I had any further information. He told me that he had heard that the fires in the Huon Valley could have been stopped, and in his words “but there was an argument between STT and PWS about who’s land it was, and who was supposed to send fire crews.” He alleged that the bureaucratic argument resulted in a 3 day delay in response to the fire. At the time I was contacted, the Tahune Airwalk had just been put on an emergency warning, and the Southwood Mill site was also coming under fire threat.

Given the emergency situation that was unfolding, and that I had not heard anything else about the delayed response, I initially did nothing with the information and dismissed it as scuttle-butt. However, in the weeks that followed I was contacted by several other people on separate occasions, with similar information. They all had intricate knowledge, and held senior or management roles in PWS or STT, or they were intimately involved in the early fire response. These were people who obviously had credibility, but who could not speak publicly about what they know. They contacted me because they felt strongly that this information was in the public interest, but asked that they remain anonymous.

I took some time in considering what to do with the information, and considered the consequences very carefully. On February 13th 2019 I made a public post on my Facebook page, “Support Tassie’s Timber People”. In the post, I shared as much of the information that had been given to me by my informants, without compromising their anonymity or exposing where the information had come from.

See Facebook post here:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2389901887747302&id=165600243510822

Of particular interest, is comments that have been publicly stated on this thread by an employee of Par Avion who was contracted to do aerial surveillance the day after the lightning strikes. I will not compromise the identities of those who contacted me with information, and do not expect that any review would believe what has been alleged without some substantiation. The following information has been gathered from government websites, and includes comments that have been made publicly by people involved. While it does not include crucial documented evidence of any disagreement between STT and PWS, it does strongly support the allegation and I ask that the Panel take it into consideration with an open mind about the possibility of its veracity.

EVIDENCE FOR CONSIDERATION

On 15th January, 2019 (Day 1) dry lightning strikes sparked several fires across the state. A member of the public called in a fire in the Huon Valley via 000, north west of Geeveston, thought to be in the area of Conways Road. I have been told that an STT staff member conducted a smoke investigation that evening. The fire was located and a report was made back to STT including the location, the size

of the fire, and what machinery and equipment would be needed to extinguish it. When the STT staff member attended, it was a small fire that was easily accessible and at that time, should have been easily managed. It was located behind a locked PWS gate in a regen coupe that had previously been logged, but is now part of the TWWHA.

The TFS website shows reported fires on the 15th January. There is one listed for “Conways Road”. There are other fires in the Huon area, only 2 that were close to the “Conways Road” fire - Judbury and Tahune Airwalk. The fire reported as Conways Road is the closest fire to Geeveston. The Judbury and Tahune fires later joined up with the Conways Road fire, and was later referred to as the “Riveaux Road” fire.



Source: TFS website 15th Jan 2019

16th January, 2019 (day 2). Luuk Velkamp is a pilot who works for Par Avion. He has publicly stated on *Support Tassie's Timber People* Facebook page that he is contracted by PWS & STT. He has stated that he was contracted on the 16th January 2019 by PWS to conduct aerial surveillance and assessments of the fires in the Huon and south west of Tasmania. As stated by Mr Velkamp, the following is a picture taken of one of the fires that morning, and Mr Velkamp states that it is the closest fire to Geeveston. There was no fire at Conways Road, but the picture provided of the fire is just east of Conways Road.



Photo supplied by Luuk Velkamp

Taken 16th January 2019

“Closest fire to Huonville”

Compare the photo taken by Veltkamp to the images below from Listmap. This is the only coupe in the area that resembles the photo taken above.



Source Listmap 23/02/2019

Base map ESRI Imagery



Source: Listmap 23/02/2019

Base map ESRI Imagery

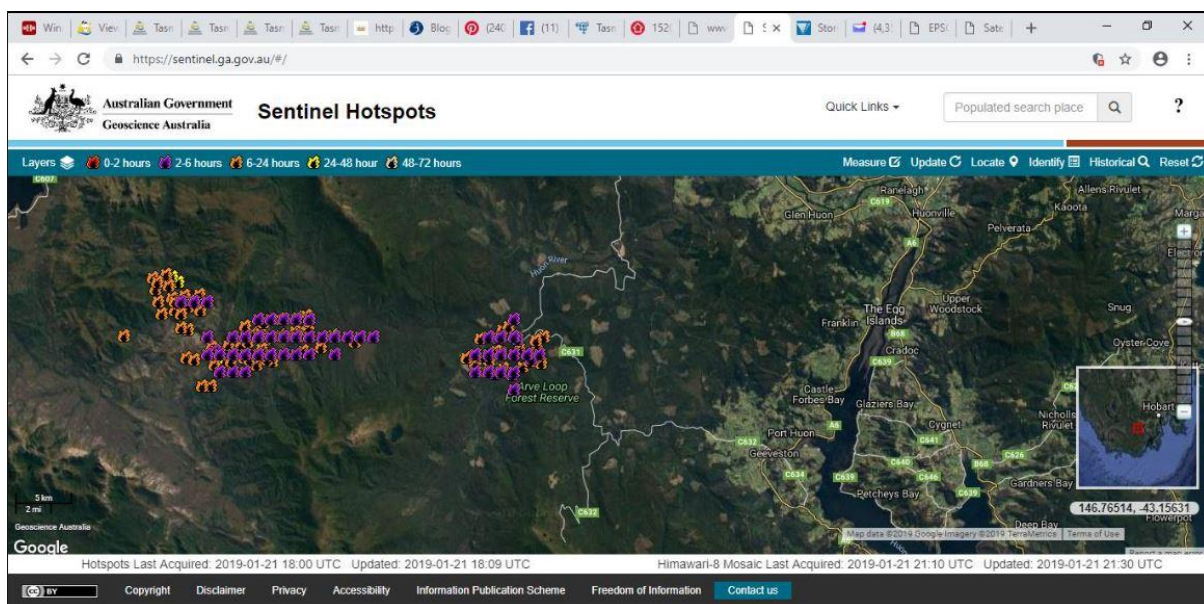
Purple shaded area defines

World Heritage Area

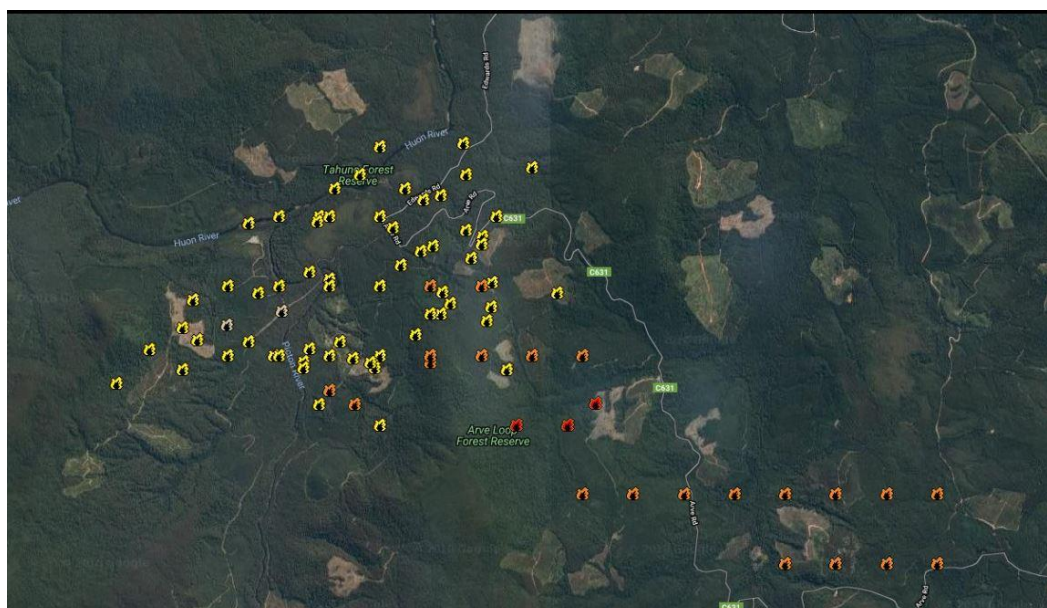
*****Note the Listmap also shows how easily accessible this area is with access roads for fast response.**

Recorded sentinel hot spots on the government website also support the closest ignition point to Geeveston was in the TWWHA coupe. The sentinel maps show the direction the fire ran, and shows how the fire in the South West near Lake Pedder joined up.

*****It's important to note that it is the head of the fire, ie the closest fire leading the direction, that causes the damage.**



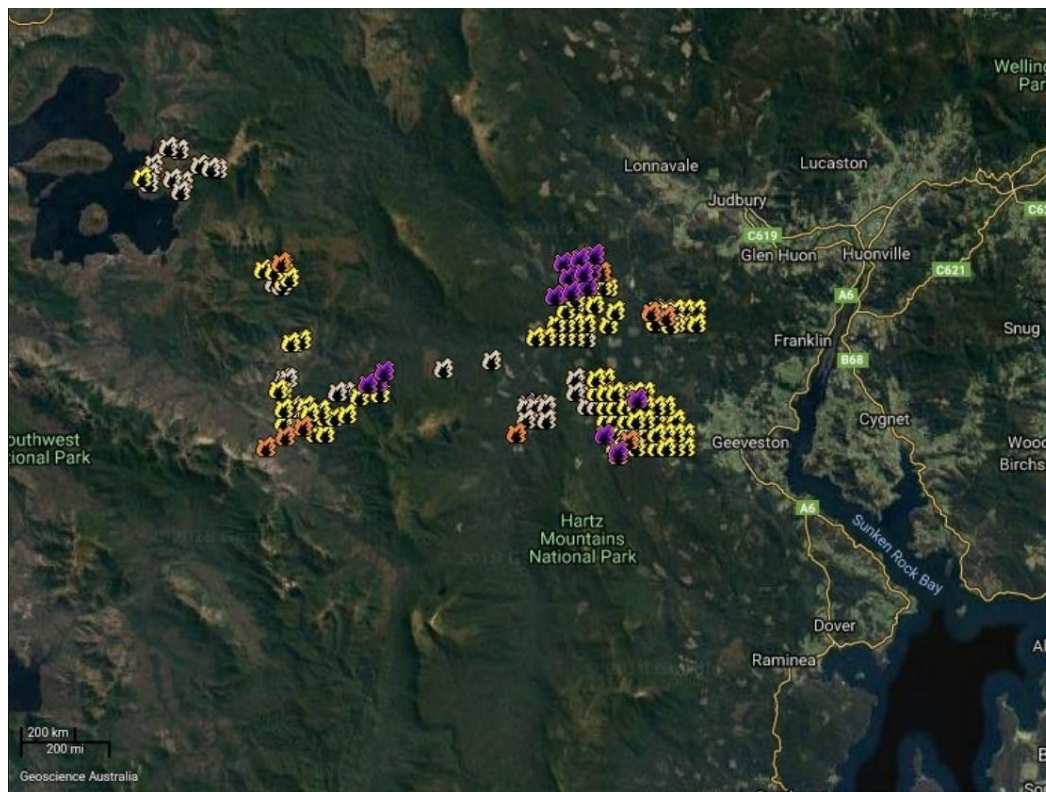
Sentinel Hotspots 22nd January 2019 – 7 days after ignition



Sentinel Hotspots 23rd Jan 2019

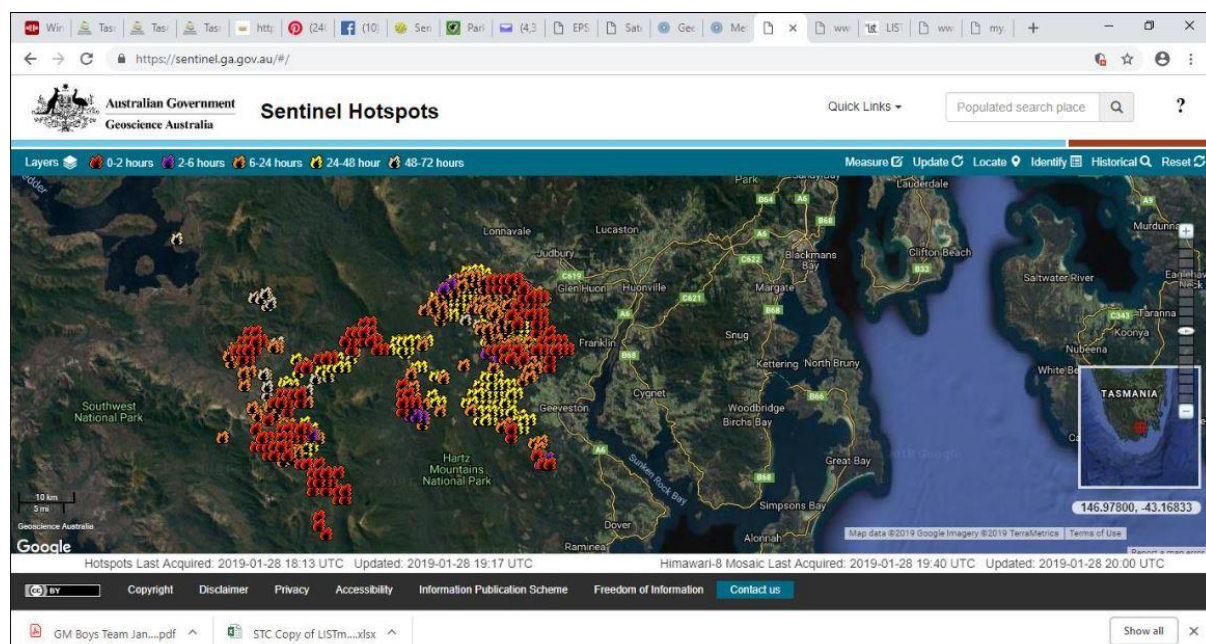
Source Australian Government Geoscience Sentinel Hotspots website

***See bootleg shaped coupe toward the left and note the south easterly direction of the fire**



Sentinel Hotspots 27th January 2019

Source Australian Government Geoscience Sentinel Hotspots website



Sentinel Hotspots 29th January 2019

***Shows Southwest fire merging with Riveaux Road Fire.**

The images above paint a clear picture of where the fire started, the size of the initial fire, easy road access for a quick response, the path the fire took, and how the fire grew and joined with other fires.

On the 15th of January, the only other fire in the Huon area that falls under PWS land management was at Hastings. Why didn't they respond immediately? Luuk Veltkamp, the Par Avion pilot who took PWS personnel to survey the fires, argued on *Support Tassie's Timber People Facebook* page, that it was a logged coupe and therefore has nothing to do with PWS. Given that this matches up with the reasons stated by my sources previously, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that this had been discussed by PWS personnel during that flight with Mr Veltkamp.

As stated earlier, the initial report of the fire by the STT staff member included a recommendation of what machinery was required to access the area to fight the fire. This recommendation was not followed by PWS, and when the crew arrived at the fire, they discovered that they were not equipped. This resulted in a further delay while the crew waited for machinery that had been recommended in the initial report, to be floated in. By the time PWS fire crews were able to commence operations, the fire was already uncontrollable.

Look again at the photo supplied by Luuk Veltkamp. Had the fire been responded to on the 15th Jan, it could have been easily extinguished! Look again at the sentinel images. The hotspots that caused such devastation to the Huon Valley are all located south east of the fire in that coupe. The wind was blowing in a south easterly direction. Is there any doubt that this was the ignition point that caused the fire to spot and spread toward Geeveston and surrounds?

- I would imagine there would be documentation of the initial fire report made by the STT staff member that would include the GPS location, size and equipment required for a fire fighting response. I respectfully ask that the Review Panel request that information from STT.
- I have unsuccessfully tried to find out intra-agency procedures that are followed in the event where a fire is initially reported by an agency other than that with responsibility of the land tenure, such as this case where STT were the first to attend but the land management responsibility was PWS. I would imagine there would be documentation of all communications, including information about who should take active responsibility and management. I respectfully ask that the Review Panel investigate how the initial report of the fire by the STT staff member was managed and passed on to PWS, and investigate if

there was any intra-agency confusion about which agency was responsible to manage a fire fighting response.

- I am assuming the initial report of the fire made by the STT staff member who first attended the fire, was passed on in full to PWS. I respectfully ask that the Review Panel investigate if this was indeed the case, and if so make further inquiries into why the machinery that was assessed as being needed, was not initially deployed.
- I ask that the Panel investigate and carefully consider whether an immediate response to that fire could have prevented other spot fires and the disaster that followed, and what procedures can be implemented to stop this happening again.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

WORLD HERITAGE AREA – USE OF HEAVY MACHINERY

I have heard several accounts during the 2018/2019 Bush Fire Emergency where the use of heavy tracked machinery was initially denied in WHA. Volunteer fire fighter Wayne Turale has alleged that the fire in the Great Pine Tier could have been stopped at 50ha or less, except they were denied access with the machinery due to policy and procedure. His story was published in the Australian newspaper 20/02/2019. See link here:

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/tasmanian-firefighters-put-blame-for-blaze-on-green-tape/news-story/c7cf4af340317027a3040ed6dc08b47a>

Similar allegations have been made to me about the fire fighting response to the Riveaux Rd fire by attending fire-fighting personnel.

- In the 2016 Tasmanian Bushfires, I was present at Deloraine when a sawmiller with intricate local knowledge of the terrain in the Western Tiers, particularly behind Meander, Mole Creek and Deloraine, approached TFS with a map and a plan to enter the WHA to put in a fire break. The sawmiller had 5 excavators and dozers, and experienced operators ready to go. The entire crew had fire fighting experience. While it was acknowledged at the time that technically access could be gained, and the firebreak likely to be effective in slowing the fire enough to provide protection for the communities that were under direct threat below – the proposal was reject because it the area was in WHA boundaries. At the time, I wrote to the then Minister for PWS questioning the policy. I received a response confirming that it is unlikely that heavy tracked machinery would be used in fire fighting response in WHA. I have attached that letter for your information. See attachment ‘Matthew Groom Fire Response’.
- Note: the use of machinery to maintain fire trails referred to by Matthew Groom, was for roads that had previously been dug up and regenerated, and was at the time the letter was written, was to re-establish the roads for fire-fighting access for the fire that was burning at Scotts Peak at the time.

- I would ask that serious consideration be given to the use of necessary machinery and equipment as an immediate response in fire suppression in WHA areas. I would note that heavy tracked machinery may be used in WHA, but that from my understanding it is not considered in an initial response; any approval that is given for heavy tracked machinery, some fire fighting equipment and fire retardant chemicals has to go through a review process; and that the approval process takes time – sometimes days, by which time the fire has moved, conditions have changed and the availability of machinery and equipment may no longer be readily available.

REPARATION OF ROADS IN WHA

When an area is added into WHA, it is standard policy to undertake reparation works on existing roads. Evidence of this is given in the attached response to the 2016 fires, when explanation was given that heavy tracked machinery was used to re-establish access roads that were dug up and regenerated. This also happened in the Arve 9b coupe when it was added to the WHA. Environment Tasmania was granted funding under the “20 million trees” project, and used that money to dig up the roads in that coupe.

- I respectfully ask that the Panel consider if digging up roads in protected areas is the best policy with regards to maintaining access roads for fire-fighting, and if those roads should be maintained by the agency responsible for the land tenure.

FIRE RISK MANAGEMENT

I have had conversations with TFS, STT, and PWS about fire-hazard reduction burns (FRB), and by what means are areas identified. I was told not withstanding environmental conditions such as ground moisture, humidity, temperature, wind strength and direction, etc – FRB’s are assessed primarily on an asset protection model. I was also told that if an area contains endangered native flora and fauna, hazard reduction burns will not be conducted, regardless of ‘assets’ close by. An example was given to me, stating that there is an area at the base of Mt Wellington behind Glenorchy where a rare native orchid grows. I was told that even though the area would be identified high priority under the asset protection model, no burns would be conducted because of the presence of the rare orchid.

- Native orchids are very resilient to fire, and are usually one of the first plants to sprout after a fire has burned through a forested area.

I was also told that other restrictions can inhibit or restrict the timing of FRB’s in areas assessed as high priority. Examples given were not being able to burn in spring time while devils and other ground dwelling animals are still in their dens, and not being able to burn in autumn in areas close to vineyards because the smoke may taint the grapes. In some areas this means FRB’s are not conducted because it is close to a vineyard and a known devil habitat, and it is too wet in winter and too dangerous in summer.

- There is much evidence documenting that ground burrowing animals are very resistant to fire due to the insulating properties of dirt. It has been well documented that burrowing animals survive low intensity extremely well.

I would suggest that legislation that regulates FRB's, policies and procedures need a complete overhaul, with a full assessment on restrictions and whether they should be applicable in all circumstances. I ask that the Review Panel consider the validity of such restrictions as outlined above.

I ask that the Panel also consider the responsibility of placing further land into formal reserve systems that have many environmental restrictions that result in higher fire risk due to legislation, removal of access roads and lack of resource funding to properly manage fire risk. And that the Panel make a recommendation to additions to future land reserves with regards to surety of sufficient resource funding for fire hazard management.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope that the information I have given in this submission has added something useful in understanding some parts of the 2018-2019 fire events. Should it be necessary, I am happy to give clarification on anything I have stated in this submission, either by phone conference or in person. I thank the Review Panel for the opportunity to share the knowledge I have of the fires, and trust that a positive outcome will be that findings from this review will be implemented.

Regards,

Kelly Wilton

Support Tassie's Timber People
(Facebook Page)