

Terms of Reference

Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Bushfire and Climate Change Research Project

2016

Preamble

Across much of Tasmania's wilderness areas record low spring rainfalls resulted in extremely high vegetation dryness levels. Storms in mid and late January 2016 resulted in a number of fires from lightning strikes. Between January and March 2016, bushfires resulted in approximately 123,000 ha across Tasmania being burned with 20,100¹ ha of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) being fire affected (around 1.27 per cent). Some of the wilderness areas affected are fire-sensitive and have had limited exposure to fire in the past.

The fire-fighting effort involved more than 5,600 Tasmanian volunteer and career fire-fighters, 1,000 interstate or overseas fire-fighters, and as many as 40 aircraft assisting each day during the peak. Initial estimates suggest that the cost of the fires will exceed \$25 million².

The fires highlighted the need to consider evidence of changing fire risk and consequently, if there are ways Tasmania could better prepare for, and respond to, bushfires in the TWWHA. In February 2016, the Premier, Will Hodgman MP, announced the Tasmanian Government's commitment of \$250,000 towards a new research initiative to investigate the impact of climate change on Tasmania's wilderness areas and strengthen fire-fighting techniques to prepare for and respond to bushfires in Tasmania's wilderness areas.

The Premier also announced that the work – which will have a specific focus on prevention, predictive modelling, fuel reduction and fire-fighting strategies in culturally and environmentally sensitive areas – will be led by an independent chair, Dr Tony Press.

A Steering Committee will be established to oversee the project and will include representatives from key Government agencies.

For this research project the 'wilderness areas' referred to by the Premier in announcing the research project are taken to be the TWWHA.

Objectives and Outcomes

Objectives

- To examine how climate change will affect future fire danger and other variables that may lead to an increased risk of bushfire, and its impacts on the TWWHA.
- To provide recommendations on the most appropriate methods for monitoring and recording vegetation dryness levels within the TWWHA.

¹ Estimate as at 9 March 2016, provided by the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

² Premier's 2016 State of the State Address, available at http://www.premier.tas.gov.au/speeches/state_of_the_state_2016

- To examine fire-fighting techniques, interventions and resources that can be safely and effectively employed by the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmania Fire Service to prepare for, and respond to, bushfires in the TWWHA, including the most appropriate methods to extinguish fire within the Alpine areas.

Outcomes

- Improved understanding of how climate change will impact on bushfire risk in the TWWHA.
- Improved ability to prepare for, and respond to, bushfires in the TWWHA.

Outputs

Stage 1

Stage 1a - Interim report

The interim report will consider and review information that is currently available. It will include:

- a summary of research examining how future fire danger and other variables will impact on Tasmania's future bushfire risk in a changing climate;
- a summary of what is known of the impacts of climate change, particularly future fire danger and other variables, that may lead to an increased bushfire risk, in the TWWHA;
- a summary of the current approaches taken by the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmania Fire Service to respond to fires in the TWWHA, including identification of fire-fighting techniques, interventions and resources that are being utilised;
- based on currently available information, identification of fire-sensitive natural and cultural assets of significance in the TWWHA so that priorities for bushfire protection can be established for them; and
- a summary of relevant research and inquiries regarding the Tasmanian Government's response to the bushfires in the TWWHA that are currently underway.

The interim report is to be completed and made available to relevant agencies by the end of July 2016.

Stage 1b - Gap analysis and sub-projects to be undertaken to address identified gaps

A gap analysis will identify areas for additional research, gaps in current approaches and additional resources and tools that are required. The gap analysis will be undertaken in parallel with the interim report so that sub-projects can commence to address the identified gaps as soon as possible.

Sub-projects to address the identified gaps will be contracted out to appropriate organisations.

Stage 2 - Final report

The final report will:

- summarise the work undertaken in Stage 1 and provide practical information and tools for the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service and the Tasmania Fire Service for the management of bushfires in the TWWHA; and
- provide recommendations to the Tasmanian and Australian Governments regarding future management of bushfire threat in the TWWHA.

The final report is to be provided to the Tasmanian Government by the first week in December 2016 with the intention that it could be publicly released by the end of the year.

Governance

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee will comprise:

- Dr Tony Press, Adjunct Professor Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre and Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (Chair).
- Mr Greg Johannes, Secretary of DPAC.
- Dr John Whittington, Secretary of DPIPW.
- Commissioner Darren Hine, Secretary of DPFEM.

Should the Australian Government choose to contribute to the project, a representative will be invited to join the Steering Committee.

Roles and functions

- Provide direction and general guidance to the Secretariat.
- Facilitate access to Agency resources.
- Consider input from the Technical Working Group.
- Ensure that the project achieves its objectives and that the project's outputs are delivered.

Frequency of meetings

- The Committee will meet as frequently as required but not less than four times during the contract period. Matters may also be addressed out-of-session by email or telephone.
- Minutes will be kept and maintained by the Secretariat and will be distributed to Committee members.

Secretariat

DPAC's Tasmanian Climate Change Office (TCCO) will provide the Secretariat for the project.

The Secretariat will be responsible for:

- establishing and managing contracts with Dr Tony Press and contracts with other organisations that may be established as part of the project;
- providing assistance as required to the Steering Committee; and
- coordinating meetings with, and input from, the Technical Working Group.

Technical Working Group

A Technical Working Group will be established with representation from DPIPW, DPFEM and DPAC.

The Technical Working Group will provide advice and input to assist with achieving the project's objectives and outputs.

The Secretariat will chair meetings of the Technical Working Group.

Budget

The total project funding is \$250,000 (exclusive of GST). Agencies will provide in-kind support to the project. The Tasmanian Government has invited the Australian Government to contribute to the project. The TCCO will manage these funds and monitor and report additional in-kind support. Project funds will be used to engage Dr Press and to establish sub-projects to address gaps identified in Stage 1 of the project.