



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry:

Responses to, and lessons learnt from, the January and
February 2016 bushfires in remote Tasmanian Wilderness

September 2017

Introduction

On 17 March 2016 the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications for inquiry and report:

The response to, and lessons learnt from, recent fires in remote Tasmanian wilderness affecting the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, with particular reference to:

- a. the impact of global warming on fire frequency and magnitude;
- b. the availability and provisions of financial, human and mechanical resources;
- c. the adequacy of fire assessment and modelling capacity;
- d. Australia's obligations as State Party to the World Heritage Convention;
- e. world best practice in remote area fire management; and
- f. any related matter.

On 8 December 2016 the Senate Inquiry tabled its report into the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area which included six recommendations.

The Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to this report.

Responses to recommendations

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- recognise that climate change has increased fire conditions in south-eastern Australia and the risk to natural and cultural values in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area; and
- report annually to the World Heritage Committee on the state of conservation in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

Government Response: Agreed in part

The Australian Government recognises the potential impacts of climate change, including the risk of fire, to the natural and cultural values in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (Tasmanian Wilderness).

The Australian Government does not support annual reporting to the World Heritage Committee. State Parties to the World Heritage Convention are invited to submit to the World Heritage Committee periodic reports on the application of the Convention, including updated information about the state of conservation of the World Heritage properties located on their territories. Since the World Heritage Committee introduced periodic reporting in 2000, Australia has submitted periodic reports on all of its World Heritage properties, including the Tasmanian Wilderness, in 2002 and 2011.

Australia also provides quarterly notification reports to the World Heritage Centre of proposed developments within or outside of the Tasmanian Wilderness that may impact its Outstanding Universal Value.

The Australian Government reports on the state of conservation of World Heritage properties when the World Heritage Committee requests the Government to do so (that is only when the Committee has serious concerns about the state of conservation of a particular property).

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in cooperation with the Tasmanian Government:

- recognise the need to identify the ecological and biodiversity impacts of fire on fire sensitive vegetation communities, organic soils and endemic fauna species in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area; and
- allocate long-term funding to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and/or the Tasmanian Government to assist with the development of fire assessment and modelling specifically suited to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

Government Response: Agreed

The Australian Government supports the Tasmanian Government's management of the Tasmanian Wilderness through an annual payment of \$3.4 million, which is more than matched by the Tasmanian Government. An additional \$10.2 million over four years from 2014-15 was provided to support Tasmania's additional and ongoing management responsibilities for the 172,000 hectares added in 2013.

The funding supports work on identifying the ecological and biodiversity impacts of fire on fire sensitive vegetation communities, organic soils and endemic fauna species in the Tasmanian Wilderness. Examples of projects supported by this funding include:

- identifying and researching the impacts of bushfire on fire sensitive and resistant vegetation types and wildlife
- identifying and understanding the impacts of bushfire on soils
- determining fire management practices to reduce risks to World Heritage values including on fire sensitive vegetation and habitat for the orange-bellied parrot.

The CSIRO is recognised as a world leader in fire behaviour research. CSIRO provides expert advice on bushfire management and modelling, and disaster management software to a wide range of governments, agencies and the public across Australia. The Australian Government's support for CSIRO is significant and the government is committed to growing this funding. CSIRO is receiving \$1.352 billion this financial year and this will increase to \$1.452 billion by 2019-20. This funding supports research directed at improving our understanding of climate change impacts, landscape adaptation and bushfire management. CSIRO actively reviews its research portfolio ensuring that its research efforts are aligned to its strategic priorities.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in conjunction with state and territory governments, investigate a national remote area firefighting capability, to support Australian fire agencies.

Government Response: Not agreed

The Australian Government does not support this recommendation, noting that bushfire response is a matter for each state and territory. National coordination of interstate firefighting assistance to a jurisdiction, including remote area firefighting capability, is already enabled through the Arrangement for Interstate Assistance, a nationally agreed framework for the provision of assistance between state and territory emergency management agencies.

The Arrangement is appropriately auspiced by the National Resource Sharing Centre of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) and is supported by the Australian Government. A key enabler of the Arrangement is the rapid convening of the Commissioners and Chief Officers Strategic Committee (CCOSC) of AFAC which is co-chaired by the Director General of Emergency Management Australia, a senior official in the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department.

During the fires that are the subject of this enquiry, the CCOSC considered requests for assistance to Tasmania in the context of the national fire risk and available resources, and specifically considered remote area firefighting capability. The Arrangement was subsequently used for the deployment of significant interstate resources, including remote area firefighters, to Tasmania.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Australian Government commit to long-term funding for the National Aerial Firefighting Centre of an amount that is at least equal to the government's current contribution, rising in line with the Consumer Price Index.

Government Response: Agreed

The Australian Government provides \$14.8 million each year to the National Aerial Firefighting Centre. Parameter adjustments will continue to be managed through normal Budget processes.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the Australian Government recognise the need to enhance protection and conservation efforts in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area by allocating increased funding:

- to the Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania, for appropriate management activities and resources; and
- for research projects aimed at providing qualitative and quantitative data specific to climate-related and ecological threats to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (such as dry lightning strike).

Government Response: Agreed in part

The Australian Government supports management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area through:

- an annual payment of \$3.4 million a year to the Tasmanian Government, including to the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (which is more than matched by the Tasmanian Government)
- an additional \$10.2 million over four years from 2014-15 to the Tasmanian Government, including to the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, to support the additional and ongoing management responsibilities for the 172,000 hectares added in 2013
- \$100,000 from its National Environmental Science Program's Emerging Priorities Fund to the University of Tasmania to invest in projects that will better protect the Tasmanian Wilderness from adverse impacts of wildfire.

This funding supports management and research projects aimed at providing qualitative and quantitative data specific to climate-related and ecological threats to the Tasmanian Wilderness. Examples of projects supported include:

- planning, on-ground activities, land management, monitoring, rehabilitation and stakeholder engagement, including with Aboriginal communities and the tourism industry
- research to reduce threats and improve, restore and present the property's natural and cultural values
- identification, protection, presentation, monitoring and rehabilitation of Aboriginal heritage
- examining the impact of climate change on weather-related fire risk factors in the Tasmanian Wilderness
- updating the landscape fire regime model currently used by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service with improved fuel layers and other spatial data, including future climate projections, and expand it to encompass the whole Tasmanian Wilderness
- examining the appropriate use of fire retardants in the Tasmanian Wilderness, including net environmental impact.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Australian and Tasmanian Governments:

- develop options to increase co-operation to ensure that the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area is protected and conserved in line with Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention; and
- work together to ensure strong provisions to protect the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area from bushfire risks are included in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan.

Government Response: Noted

The Australian and Tasmanian governments work collaboratively to ensure that Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention are met. This shared commitment to meeting Australia's obligations was recognised in the World Heritage Committee's decision on the Tasmanian Wilderness in 2016. The decision commended the commitment of the Australian and Tasmanian governments to rule out all forms of commercial logging and mining in the whole of the property, as well the commitment to implement all of the 20 recommendations made by the 2015 reactive monitoring mission.

In 2016, the Australian Government worked with the Tasmanian Government and reviewed the draft management plan for the Tasmanian Wilderness to ensure its consistency with the Australian World Heritage Principles included in the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

On 10 December 2016, the management plan for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area was published. The 2016 management plan recognises the impact of fire as the greatest challenge for the management of the property. The new management plan takes into account the recommendations of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council's independent review of 2016 fires by:

- addressing communication of fire management to key stakeholders
- detailing cross tenure fire management arrangements and legislative obligations.

The new management plan puts in place a range of measures to mitigate the impact of bushfire on the property, including through research and ecological burning. Fire management in the Tasmanian Wilderness is based upon a well-developed strategic risk-management approach that assesses, identifies, prioritises and manages the risk posed to reserve values.

The Tasmanian Government will develop a holistic fire plan covering all aspects of fire management for the property which will:

- include objectives to guide fire management for the protection and conservation of the property's Outstanding Universal Value
- provide guidance for prioritising the protection of the property's Outstanding Universal Value over other values or structures.