

Tasmanian bushwalker escapes flames from firebombing helicopter

By Ellen Coulter

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A southern Tasmanian woman's terrifying experience with a firebombing helicopter has forced Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service to review its fuel reduction burn procedures.

Lee Evans was hiking near Mount Edith last Thursday when she noticed a helicopter firebombing the area.

The experienced bushwalker said she was not aware fuel reduction burns were planned.

She waved her white beanie to try to get the helicopter pilot's attention but she said the chopper continued with the burn.

She soon realised there was too much smoke to follow her planned route back to her car, the main spur behind her had been firebombed, and spots ahead of her were starting to burn.

With flames within hundreds of metres, Ms Evans had to take evasive action.

She tried to keep upwind and downhill of the burning areas.

"I've been in some hairy situations before, walking, with weather and terrain, but I've never been so frightened in my life," she said.

"One wrong decision in that situation, it really could have been nasty."

When she was about 500 metres from the road and her car, there was fire on either side of her.

"There were a number of points where there was smoke pluming up and even visible flames within 10 metres of me," she said.

"It's not an experience I care to repeat."

Ms Evans said she believed things could have ended differently for a less-experienced walker.

"I hate to think. I had a hard enough time of it," she said.

"Someone who had less of an understanding of how fires work, was less experienced with dealing with Tasmanian bush ... it would be easy for someone to panic in a situation like that."

Parks and Wildlife Service reviewing procedures

Mount Edith was not listed on the Parks and Wildlife Service website as a planned burn.

Ms Evans said she wanted answers from Parks about their processes for checking areas were clear.

"Did they actually see me? Because I tried on at least three occasions to get their attention," she asked.

"If they didn't, what sort of lookout do they keep when they're doing this sort of work? What sort of procedures do they have in place to make sure these burn offs are done safely?"

"People [need to] know that there is a risk if they go in, even in an area as isolated as the Tarkine. Signs? Something."

The Parks and Wildlife Service released a statement saying they were "extremely concerned".

The service is investigating the safety processes followed last week and would also now review its fuel reduction burn procedures.



PHOTO: Bushwalker Lee Evans says she had to run between two fires to reach safety. (ABC News)

MAP: TAS

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Lee Evans, bushwalker

The statement said public and staff safety was the highest priority of all fuel reduction burns undertaken by the service.

Parks said although the public was notified before burns began, walkers were encouraged to check at Parks and Wildlife offices as well.

Chris Bell from Tasmania's National Parks Association said he had never heard of an incident like what happened to Ms Evans.

"Certainly, we need to make sure of two things - that walkers take responsibility for their own actions but you can only do so much, you can't be aware of every controlled burn that's going to be conducted in the state, but also that Parks and Wildlife need to make sure that their procedures are squeaky clean," he said.

"I know from my experience from Parks, they're dedicated personnel."

"It seems more than likely it's a result of too few staff ... and that's the result of a government that hardly knows what our national parks are all about."

Topics: national-parks, bushfire, lifestyle-and-leisure, tas

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