

## **Time to face reality on burning issue of state bushfire threat**

It is time for some consensus.

Experts are telling us that climate change, drier soils and an abundance of vegetation dictate Tasmania's bushfire seasons are going to start earlier and continue longer each year. Benign summers are going to be the exception rather than the rule.

The consensus we need is over fuel reduction – and how best to address the problem while we can do something about it in a controlled manner.

The state government has committed \$28 million to fuel reduction burns over the next four years. This process will be managed by Parks and Wildlife, in cooperation with the Tasmania Fire Service and Forestry Tasmania.

The risk in Tasmania is heightened with fact that more than half of the state's area is now held in public ownership – in national parks, the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and other forms of reserves. In these tracts, our hands are tied unless we have a rethink about reducing risks.

The contraction of the forestry industry exacerbates the problem. We've lost an army of skilled forest workers and bush contractors who have been managing our forests so well for so long, who have always been on the front line in firefighting. These are the people, who, with farmers, have traditionally manned the fire trucks each summer.

The farmers' view is that we can't solve the problem of too much fuel in the forests in a matter of a year or two. It is going to take some years to address this; and it is going to be a case of eternal vigilance.

The small amount of funding allocated by the government is a good start – and most welcome. However, in reality, it is nowhere near enough to manage the risks that are increasing as land in public ownership expands and fuel loads worsen.

We also need to have some more informed discussion about the impact that fuel reduction burns on public lands will have on neighbouring private property; and of how private landowners can be engaged in these important activities to ensure the best possible overall outcomes.

Incredibly, there are those in our community who berate efforts to reduce the risk of bushfires to society at large. A correspondent in a cosy corner of northern Tasmania continually takes me to task on this matter. There is clear evidence, he writes, of air

pollution causing lung cancer. Burning off 60,000 ha before the summer each year is just asking for trouble.

"The particulates from this burning that you say we should get on with quickly have been determined to cause lung and liver cancer so this can effect (sic) everyone, even the healthy..." he writes.

Of course, we are aware of the issues surrounding potential environmental smoke hazards, but the fatal pollution to which he refers mainly involves such things as smog haze where the particulate matter is 2.5 micrometres or less. They are not usually generated by agricultural land uses, hazard reductions, etc.

To suggest that planned and controlled fuel reduction burns are the equivalent of industrialised smog and vehicle emissions does not stand up to scrutiny in the Tasmanian context. On the contrary, summer bushfires that have high combustible fuel loads pose a much more significant risk.

Paradoxically, the people who would save our forests from the loggers, or who complain about smoke haze from fuel reduction burns, are often not those on the front line when forests are really endangered.

We saw the devastation caused by the Dunalley fires last year – and they could have been so much worse. I don't have to remind you that 173 people died in the 2009 Victorian bushfires; 414 people were injured, many of them severely; 7650 individuals were displaced; more than 2000 homes were destroyed.

We all have a duty to support measures that protect the community from the ravages of bushfires and the inevitable heartache that incidents bring.

We all have a duty to minimise the risk we present to ourselves and to our neighbours.

It is time to garner some perspective on the real potential terror problem that we face in Tasmania, and to be realistic in how we go about minimising the risks to all Tasmanians.

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