

Use of military personnel and volunteers

Background

Responsibility for fighting bushfires within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) resides at the state level, however, at times when there are large bushfires burning there is usually a public discussion around the use of national resources, such as the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Similarly, there is often an appeal to call on non fire trained volunteers from within the community.

Australian firefighting agencies assist each other across land tenure and state boundaries whenever the need arises and resources are available. During lengthy and difficult fire seasons, additional firefighting resources have been provided from overseas, notably New Zealand, Canada and the United States.

During previous fire seasons the Tasmanian fire agencies have used ADF personnel and volunteers from the community to support bushfire operations. In recent years, calls to increase the use of ADF personnel and community volunteers for firefighting in remote areas have been considered.

Understanding what is involved to safely fight bushfires in remote areas of the TWWHA is critical in making decisions around the use of other agency personnel and volunteers.



Fenton base camp, set up to support the Gell River fire, 2019

Challenges

Remote-area firefighting requires specialist skills, as firefighters are working around helicopters and water-bombing aircraft, undertaking off-track navigation, negotiating steep terrain and exposed to extreme weather changes. In Tasmania, it is not uncommon for remote-area firefighters to be fighting fires in high temperatures one day only to be pulled off the fire ground due to snow the next.

Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service firefighters must complete training in helicopter operations, the use of remote-area pumps, complex hose-lay arrangements and remote-area first aid, as well as completing a medical and fitness test. This requires a large number of hours of training and on-ground mentoring before an individual can be deemed competent in remote-area firefighting.

The Parks and Wildlife Service recognises two types of firefighters based on fitness levels and training. Arduous-rated firefighters are able to operate in remote areas (more than a 45-minute walk from a road), whereas moderate-rated firefighters tend to participate in vehicle-based firefighting. Most Tasmania Fire Service volunteers are skilled in vehicle-based firefighting.

Military type personnel are not trained in remote-area firefighting, but can provide a useful role in organising logistics such as base camps and evacuations. Similarly, most Tasmania Fire Service volunteers are not trained in remote-area firefighting but are utilised for vehicle-based firefighting.

Firefighting agencies such as the Parks and Wildlife Service and Tasmania Fire Service utilise a common system for managing incidents: the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System. This allows seamless interoperability between firefighting agencies and between states and territories. Any escalation of response involving the ADF means a significant amount of disruption to established processes, as these personnel use a different incident-management system.

The ADF's primary purpose is to defend Australia's borders, people and way of life. To rely on the defence force for routine domestic responses, such as firefighting, would require military personnel to be trained in fighting bushfires. Given military personnel are highly trained in specialist roles other than firefighting, utilising them for firefighting is a very expensive proposition.

The way forward

The Parks and Wildlife Service should continue to only use people who have training, skills and experience recognised at a national level to fight fires in remote areas. The fire ground is a workplace and firefighting must be conducted in accordance with the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*.

The Parks and Wildlife Service recognises that military personnel and community volunteers, including Tasmania Fire Service volunteer firefighters, can provide a valuable supporting role in remote-area firefighting operations. However, unless individuals have the necessary training and experience they should not be deployed to fight fires in remote areas.

OTHER ISSUES SHEETS THAT MAY BE OF INTEREST

- 07 Use of aircraft
- 08 Fire suppressants and retardants
- 09 Use of machinery

