

HOBART CITY COUNCIL

Attachment A
Fire Risk Management Report
2012-13



Open Space Group

File 45-2-1



HOBART
CITY COUNCIL

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Document History

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1. Introduction

This report presents a broad overview of the 2012-13 summer in Hobart, and the fire risk management activities undertaken by Hobart City Council's Open Space Group.

2. Season Overview

2.1 Climatic conditions

Summer 2012-13 in Australia was notable for the severity and duration of hot weather, and the setting of a great many new records for highest temperature at many recording stations¹. Hobart recorded a new hottest daily maximum temperature of 41.8° C at 4pm on the 4th January, a full degree hotter than the previous hottest day set in 1976.

A notable aspect of the summer weather pattern was that through winter and early spring 2012 there was little in the way of predictive indicators that a hot summer was approaching. The Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre² predicted in August 2012 a 'normal to below normal' bushfire potential into 2013 in their seasonal outlook for southern Australia.

2.2 Fire weather

2.2.1 Total Fire Ban days in the south of Tasmania

Summer 2012-13 had an above-average number of total fire ban days called by the Tasmania Fire Service. Nine instances of total firebans were called for in the TFS southern region either as standalone or as part of a wider fire ban (typically, a 'normal' summer will have two to four instances of total fire ban in the south). The earliest was in late November 2012 and the last was mid-March 2013, reflecting the very long duration of fire weather across that summer period.

Of the total fire ban days called, there were two instances where the total fire ban extended beyond one day duration, a rare occurrence for Tasmania. These occurred on the 3rd/4th January and the 7th/8th February. Both these two-day total fire ban periods coincided with a major campaign fire in the south of the state.

The operational responses to Total Fire Bans were enacted each time as per the requirements of the Open Space Group's Wildfire Management Arrangements summertime standard operating procedures manual.

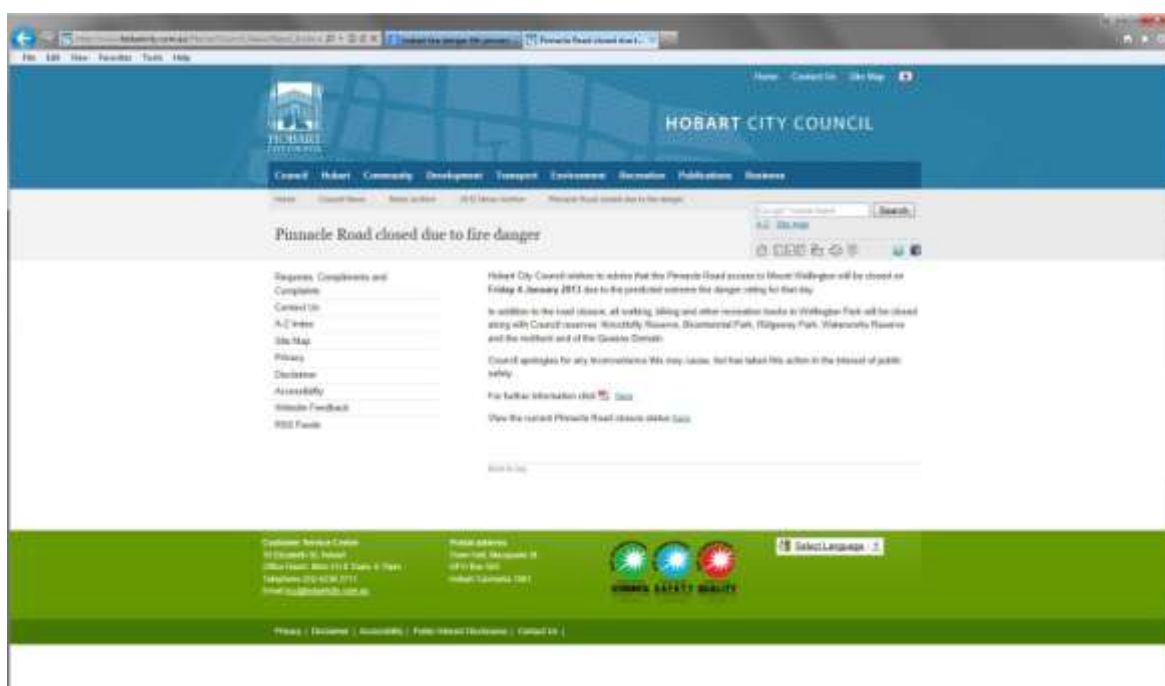
¹ 'The Angry Summer' Climate Commission, 2013 <http://climatecommission.gov.au/>

² Fire Note 95, Bushfire CRC, 2012 <http://www.bushfirecrc.com/resources/firenote/southern-australian-seasonal-bushfire-outlook-2012-13>

2.2.2 Catastrophic fire weather event- January 4th 2013

In the days preceding January 4th 2013, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Tasmania Fire Service were predicting the approach of unusually dangerous fire weather. The 3rd January was itself considered sufficiently high risk for a total fire ban to be called, and the expectation was that the 4th would easily reach the 'Extreme' category (Index between 75 and 99) on the Fire Danger Rating Scale.

With clear predictions to base decisions on, the process of enacting the parts of the Wildfire Management Arrangements operating procedures manual relating to 'Extreme' or higher fire danger. This was the first time that several procedures in this manual had been enacted, including the closing of bushland reserves and Pinnacle Road on Mt Wellington, since the Council adopted this approach in December 2009 following the Victorian Fires tragedy.



Picture 1: Hobart City Council webpage announcing Pinnacle Road closure 4th January 2013

All preparations were in place on the morning of the 4th January, well before the worst weather of the day arrived. In the late morning, the Tasmania Fire Service requested the Bushland Fire Officer attend the Incident Control Room at TFS' Cambridge complex where both the Dunalley and Derwent Valley fires were being managed from. The intent was to be ready to provide assistance and a conduit for communication should a fire break out in the Hobart area, as incident control resources were already heavily committed to manage the existing incidents.

The fire weather on 4th January 2013 exceeded the predicted fire danger, reaching 'Catastrophic' conditions in Hobart in the early afternoon and remaining there well through into the early evening. Thankfully, Hobart remained free of major fire incidents.

The combination of high wind, very high temperature and very low humidity caused a significant amount of plant death throughout greater Hobart. Many plant species at the edge of their ranges or on exposed north-facing hillsides were desiccated beyond their ability to withstand. Olinda Grove, parts of Ridgeway and the north-facing slope of Knocklofty were particularly affected.



Picture 2: Dead white peppermint sapling on Knocklofty, a result of the January 4th weather

2.3 Fire events in Hobart

2.3.1 Queens Domain fire- January 24th and 25th 2013

On the evening of Thursday January 24th, a fire broke out in the northern part of the Queens Domain. The Tasmania Fire Service responded quickly and had the area largely under control by the early hours of the 25th. Council fire and track crew personnel, the Manager Bushland and Reserves and the Bushland Fire Officer assessed the site early on the 25th and closed the affected areas. They then worked to assist the TFS in mopping up and to re-open the walking tracks as soon as practicable.



Picture 3: Hobart City Council staff mopping up following the Domain fire

The TFS formally handed the site back to Council control during the morning of the 25th. Council staff continued on site throughout the 25th and the 26th (a Saturday) in mild damp conditions, completing the mopping up, extinguishing stumps burning underground, assessing and managing trees weakened by fire, and re-opening walking tracks as they became safe to do so. Throughout the following week, the site was regularly monitored for burning stumps and weakened trees.



Picture 4: Closed walking track on the fire edge

2.3.2 Molesworth fire- Early February 2013

A wildfire in began in the Glen Dhu area of Molesworth on Wednesday the 6th February. The fire burned southwards in rugged terrain over the following days and entered Wellington Park in the vicinity of Collins Cap.

The Wellington Park Management Trust's Fire Management Coordinator attended the Tasmania Fire Service's Incident Control Team established at Cambridge. He opened a direct line of contact to Council's Open Space Group through the Bushland Fire Officer to relay TFS requirements, seek information and coordinate on-ground support activities. Council's Emergency Management Coordinator was kept informed throughout.

Initial requests to Council staff related to Incident Control forward planning. Information was sought as to the condition of fuel loads, firebreaks and fire trails across the eastern face of Mount Wellington that could potentially be used if the fire could not be contained at Collins Cap and the East-West Fire Trail.

Late on Friday 8th February, the TFS requested that Pinnacle Road be closed at Bracken Lane on the following day. The Wellington Park Fire Management Coordinator relayed this request through and preparations were made to enact this. Council personnel checked and cleared the Pinnacle Road area of visitors early on the morning of Saturday the 9th, and closed the Bracken Lane boomgate. Media releases were made and tour operators notified as per standard operating procedures, and temporary signage placed out at key locations along Huon Road in both directions. To avoid possible traffic problems, a temporary barricade was set up on the Huon Road/Pillinger Drive intersection to turn around tourists and visitors while allowing Pillinger Drive residents free access in and out. The barricade was staffed throughout the day, and its presence was well received by the majority of those affected.

Pinnacle Road was re-opened on Sunday 10th February at 8am. The Manager Bushland and Reserves, Bushland Operations Manager, Bushland Fire Officer, and Supervisor Fire Management remained on-call for any further instructions from the Tasmania Fire Service. While the fire continued over the following days, no further requests were received.

3. Works programs

3.1 Urban fringe firebreak program

The urban firebreak network encompasses 109 firebreaks and reduced fuel areas across all bush fringe suburbs in the Hobart municipal area. In total, this involves the slashing, mowing and/or raking clear of 28 hectares of land. Works began in spring and continued into summer. Through late summer and autumn, inspections were conducted to ensure breaks were still in a good fuel reduced condition. Very little follow-up works were required to maintain the breaks in effective condition.

3.2 Hazard Abatement enforcements on private land

The 2012-13 program of fire hazard abatement notices (enforcements under Section 200 of the *Local Government Act (1993)*) ran for approximately 22 weeks. Despite the strong spring 2012 growth rates and rapid drying over December, no noticeable increase in fire related complaints were received as compared to the average for the last five years. For summer 2012-13, 74 notices were issued. Of these only 18 led to compulsory clearances.

3.3 Community education

3.3.1 Mt Nelson forum

A combined Hobart City Council/Tasmania Fire Service community information forum was held at the Mount Nelson Primary School Hall on Sunday December 9th. Representatives from the Tasmania Fire Service covered fire preparedness and response, the Nearby Safer Places and what to expect from the coming summer. Hobart City Council's Bushland Fire Officer covered the management of the council-owned bushland in the area, management programs, regulatory aspects such as backyard burning and fire hazard abatement notices. Also attending was consultant Axel von Krusenstierna, who presented the forthcoming review of the Bicentennial Park/Porter Hill Fire Management Plan. Two sessions were run, and attendance was moderate at both. The presentation was well received, and general feedback was positive, particularly as regards the strong links between Tasmania Fire Service and Hobart City Council- something not immediately visible from the general community's perspective.



3.3.2 South Hobart residents meeting

In response to a request from a group of residents in Jubilee Road and Marlyn Road South Hobart, the Bushland Fire Officer attended an evening group discussion and information session in spring 2012. Issues covered included Council land management, Nearby Safer Places, fire response options and potential ways to improve a house’s ember resistance.

3.3.3 Upper Strickland Avenue residents meeting

A group of residents living in the upper end of Strickland Avenue South Hobart invited the Bushland Fire Officer and Wellington Park Fire Management Coordinator to attend an evening group discussion in spring 2012. Issues covered included plans for management burns, the Wellington Park Fire Management Strategy and its implementation, and plans for fuel management in the Strickland Avenue/Huon Road area.

3.4 Prescribed burn program- Spring 2012 to Winter 2013

Twelve burns were conducted in Council-owned bushland during spring 2012 and autumn 2013. These burns were located in Bicentennial Park, Wellington Park, the Barossa Catchment in Lenah Valley, Ridgeway Park and the Queens Domain.

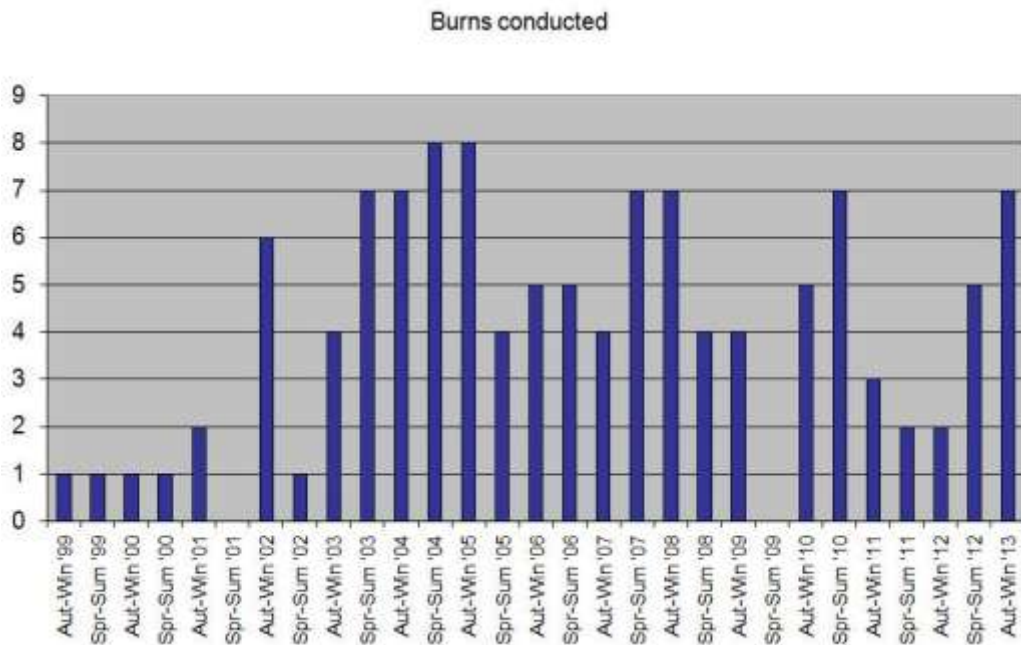


Figure 1: Vegetation Management Units burned since 1999

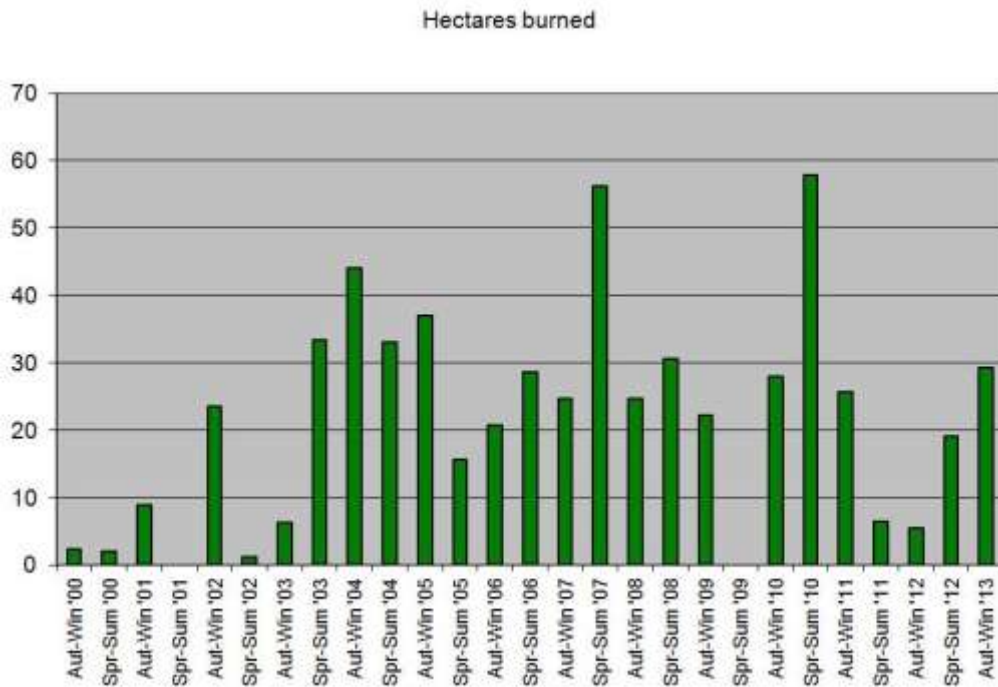


Figure 2: Area burned per season since 1999 (hectares)

One notable inclusion in the spring 2012 program was a new burn unit in bushland adjacent to the Mount Nelson Oval. This area was identified as a Nearby Safer Place in the Tasmania Fire Service’s Community Protection Planning project during 2010-2011. In discussion with TFS officers, it became apparent that conducting a burn in this location would improve the Nearby Safer Place considerably, so a burn plan was drawn up for the spring of 2012 to ensure the site was fully prepared for the coming summer.



Picture 5: Prescribed burn underway adjacent to the Mount Nelson Oval Nearby Safer Place

3.5 Management Burn Program efficiency

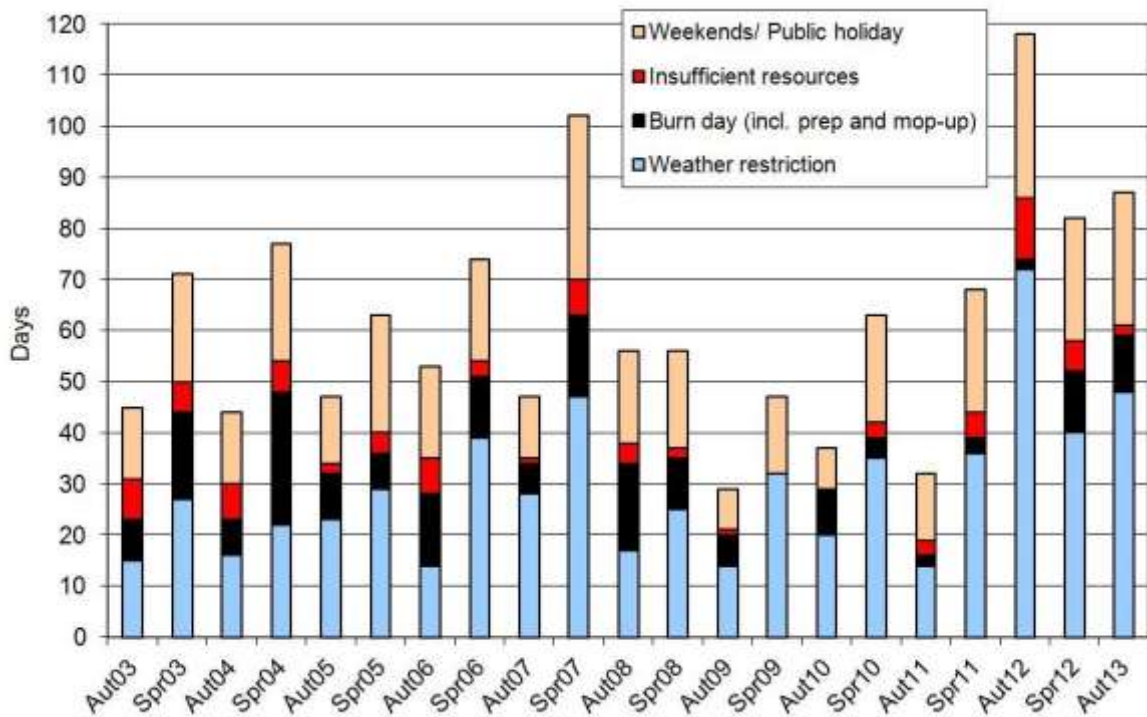


Figure 3: Burn season breakdowns since autumn 2003

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of seasonal burn programs since autumn 2003. Each season is divided into four categories:

- the days where burning was undertaken (black)
- days that were not appropriate for burning due to weather or site conditions (pale blue)
- weekend and public holidays (pale orange), and
- the number of days where there was appropriate weather but no burning activities took place due to logistical or resourcing limitations (red).

The spring 2012 and autumn 2013 burn programs improved markedly on the previous two years' results (the black portions on the graph bars in Figure 3 above). This was partly a result of much more favourable weather conditions in spring and autumn.

4. HCC plans, strategies and policy development

4.1 HCC Fire Management Strategy 2013

In January 2013, a working group was formed to review and update the Hobart City Council Fire Management Strategy. The specific tasks of the group are:

- To review the 1998 Fire Management Strategy
- To produce a plain-language Fire Management Strategy document that clearly outlines the Council's roles
- To develop a suite of policies, programs and activities that will be undertaken to implement the strategy's commitments

Core aspects for the review as stated in the Strategic Risk Register are:

- Planning policy, including Part 5 Agreements/Bushfire Hazard Management Plans
- Wildfire risk management in bushland reserves and on other council-owned land
- Land management policy as regards developments neighbouring HCC land
- Community response and recovery
- Wildfire and climate change impacts

Other significant areas of consideration are closer integration with the HCC Emergency Management Plan, improved fire management links with large property owners in Hobart, community resilience building, and supporting the TFS Community Preparedness Planning projects

Project timeline

- February 2013: Project inception and formation of working group, development of first draft
- September 2013: Submit draft to Council for approval to release for public and agency comment, Release of draft for public and agency comment
- December 2013: 2nd Draft submitted to Council for final approval, final document formatted and released.

4.2 Bicentennial Park/Porter Hill Fire Management Plan

The review of the Council's Lambert Park/Skyline Reserve Fire Management Plan (1998) commenced in June 2012 as the first stage of a full update and expansion of the plan to cover all Council bushland in Mount Nelson and Lower Sandy Bay. The findings of the review were substantially positive, with large proportions of the recommendations wholly or partly implemented.

As at the time of writing, substantial progress has been made in the development of the new Bicentennial Park/Porter Hill Fire Management Plan.

The draft plan is due to be received during spring 2013 for a round of officer consultation before being referred to Council for approval to release the document for community consultation and subsequent finalisation.

5. State plans, strategies and policy development

5.1 *Changes in role for the State Fire Management Council*

The State Fire Management Council (SFMC) is an independently chaired statutory body established under the *Fire Service Act (1979)*. Membership is prescribed in the Act, and includes a person nominated by the Local Government Association of Tasmania and appointed by the Minister for Police and Emergency Management to represent the interests of local government. Currently, that representative is the Hobart City Council's Bushland Fire Officer.

The SFMC has the following functions:

- to develop a state vegetation fire management policy;
- to advise and report regularly to the Minister on such matters relating to the administration of the *Fire Service Act (1979)*, as it applies to vegetation fire management;
- to provide advice the State Fire Commission regarding the prevention and mitigation of vegetation fires;
- to perform such other functions relating to the prevention or mitigation of vegetation fires as the Minister may direct; and
- to provide an annual report to the Minister and the Commission on its activities (and that of its sub-committees) for inclusion in the annual report of the Commission.

In 2012, a suite of amendments were made to the *Fire Service Act (1979)* that administratively aligned the responsibility for bushfire fuel management to the SFMC where previously this role belonged to the State Fire Commission. To properly address this responsibility, the SFMC began a process of re-forming Fire Management Area Committees (FMACs) throughout the state. Each FMAC is responsible for the preparation of a Fire Protection Plan for its area, supported by and reporting to the SFMC.

Membership of an FMAC is set out in the *Fire Service Act (1979)*, and local government is one of a core group of entities required on any FMAC that might be formed. Councils that fall wholly or partly within an FMAC area may individually represent themselves on that FMAC, or a single agreed nominee may represent all affected councils.

5.2 Hobart Fire Management Area Committee

Up until late 2012, the body responsible for landscape scale fire risk management in the wider western shore of Hobart was the Hobart Special Fire Area Committee. This group included representation from Hobart (represented by the Bushland Fire Officer), Glenorchy, Kingborough and Derwent Valley councils. The HSFAC met twice yearly and was a valued component of the broader fire and risk management process. The 2012 amendments to the *Fire Service Act (1979)* removed all references to Special Fire Areas and so the HSFAC ceased to exist.

The roles and responsibilities of the HSFAC will be picked up by a new Hobart Fire Management Area Committee. This new body will have very similar membership, and is expected to operate in much the same manner albeit over a much larger area encompassing both the western and eastern shores of the Derwent.

The prime focus of the Hobart FMAC will be to prepare a fire protection plan for its area, to identify and prioritise bushfire vegetation risks, and to prioritise strategic works to mitigate any perceived risks. Informing this process will be technical and scientific inputs from SFMC including the relevant outputs from the comprehensive GIS-based Bushfire Risk Assessment Model that the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service have been developing in recent years. When combined with the detailed on-ground knowledge the FMAC members will possess, it is expected this will be a significant positive contribution to managing fire risk on Hobart's bush fringes.

The Hobart FMAC is expected to be convened for its first meeting in August or September 2013.

5.3 Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry

The Tasmanian Bushfires Inquiry was called by the Premier on the 9th April 2013 in response to the fire events of summer 2012-13, and particularly the situation around the 4th January 2013 and the three large fires running on that day- the Forcett-Dunalley Fire, the Lake Repulse Fire and the Bicheno Fire.

Hobart City Council officers have provided information to the Inquiry however no formal submission was made. Submissions to the Inquiry closed on the 14th June, and the report is expected by 30 September 2013.

6. Summer 2013-14

6.1 Current predictions

At the time of writing, the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre had not yet released their outlook for summer 2013-14 for Southern Australia. Typically, early predictions are expected to be released in mid-late August.

The Bureau of Meteorology's Predictive Ocean Atmosphere Model for Australia (POAMA) is forecasting the coming spring and summer will be neutral to weakly La Niña conditions in southern Australia. Typically, La Niña summers are cooler and wetter than average. Similarly, the Indian Ocean Dipole sea surface temperature modelling forecast shows weakly negative conditions are likely, which also translates to an expectation of average to slightly increased rainfall in southern Australia.

As the seasons progress into spring, there will be a much clearer picture of likely summer weather, and HCC's fire management will adapt accordingly.

6.2 Forward works planning

With consistent winter rains to date and a predicted likelihood that this will continue into spring, it is likely that early spring growth rates will be strong throughout the city. Preparations for an earlier start to the works programs are being made in expectation of this.

Prescribed burns will be determined based on the requirements of the existing Fire Management Plans (Queens Domain, Knocklofty-McRobies, Ridgeway/Waterworks and the Hobart portions of the Wellington Park Fire Management Strategy), the new Bicentennial Park/Porter Hill Fire Management Plan (which will be submitted for Council's endorsement across spring-summer 2013-14) and the early planning work expected to arise from the inaugural meetings of the Hobart Fire Management Area Committee.