

Tasmanian Bushfire Recovery Taskforce reflections

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The summer of 2018–2019 was an unprecedented bushfire season for Tasmania. Around 70 bushfires burned across Tasmania at the peak of the fire activity. More than 205,000 hectares were burnt; approximately 40 per cent being located in Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas.

During the fire season, firefighting activities ran for over 80 days; much of it by specialist fire crews in remote areas. Incredibly, there was no loss of life and only six houses were destroyed. The fires caused significant damage to the Tahune Airwalk and the Southwood Timber Mill, with many other businesses in primary industry and tourism being severely affected.

With unpredictable fire conditions and changeable strong winds, many communities were continually under threat from the bushfires. Some people were evacuated from their homes multiple times. Being on tenterhooks for so long takes its toll on people. One resident said:

... [the bushfires] went on for weeks – we kept listening to the radio and preparing to protect our house. I almost wanted the flames to come over that hill... I was so sick of waiting and being on alert.

Another woman talked about the impact on her child of weeks of vigilance and a couple of evacuations.

My seven-year-old daughter is now terrified of dark clouds because she thinks there will be a storm and we'll get more dry lightning that will start fires, and that we could lose our house. She cries every time she sees dark clouds now and I don't know how to comfort her...

Thankfully, there are resources available to help parents acknowledge their child's fears and reassure them there are systems in place to protect them. In this example, official advice about evacuation helped the decision to evacuate early and the firefighters kept the fires at bay and families safe.

Effects from the bushfires are felt in different ways by different people and sometimes in quite unexpected ways. One woman said:

...when I was in the evacuation centre I was sure my house would burn down. I started thinking about what I'd do next ... that I might move to another community, to a new house. I thought about where I wanted to live and how my life would change. My house didn't burn down though and now I feel disconnected from it and from the community... I don't think I want to live there anymore.

The evacuation process was traumatic for some, with people worried about what and who they were leaving behind. Relationships were put under immense pressure, as is shown through the comment by one resident:

...I evacuated with the kids but my husband stayed behind to protect our home. I didn't know if he was safe, or what was happening to him. I'm really angry that he put me and the kids through that worry....

Such events can also bring back memories of previous traumas. One rural property owner said:

...the fires this year made me think of the floods in 2016, when our property was inundated. We had to go out and shoot the stock. That's rural life, I suppose.

The stereotype of stoic and resilient people in rural areas can pressure locals to pretend that everything is okay. There was a strong sentiment from many people that they didn't need help and saw others as being more in need and deserving.

It has been said before that emergencies bring out the best and the worst in communities. The level of support and assistance people gave each other through this bushfire season cannot be underestimated. People helped neighbours prepare their houses, looked after one another during evacuation, and volunteered at the evacuation centre. One woman said:

...the community has been amazing... everyone came together and helped everyone else. It brought us together. Being in the evacuation centre was tiring, but it was also fun to be with other people who had been through the same thing. It was hard to leave....

These stories show how important it is that we hear community voices to help us understand the variety of impacts on people such events have. This reinforces that emotional support and resources are needed to help people recover and rebuild their lives.