

27th May 2020

To all Members of Tasmanian Parliament and Tasmanian Members of Federal Parliament,

We, the Independent Science Council of Tasmania, are writing to you concerning the link between forestry and fire. The Science Council is composed of scientists and science communicators who are a source of independent, non-government advice, focusing on policy reforms of significant State interest.

Two of our members of the Science Council have recently published new research that has found that logging increases the severity of fires. The study examined the area impacted by the Riveaux Road fire in the Huon Valley which burned in January 2019. We found that logging regrowth and plantations burned at a higher severity (both had 60% occurrence of crown fires) than mature forests and old growth (21% and 12% occurrence of crown fires respectively). Crown fires, compared to low level fires which burn through the understory, are intense fires which spread a lot easier, are often harder to control, and they are also the source of embers.

Another recently published study from researchers from Australian National University have found similar results from forests in Victoria. They conducted a spatial analysis of fires in Victoria and found that areas of State forests, which are subject to logging, had burned more than areas of National Park, which generally contain old growth forest.

These two new studies complement the compelling body of evidence that shows that logging is increasing our bushfire risk. Another two previous Australian studies have found that logging not only makes fires more severe, but disturbed forests are more than eight times as likely to burn than mature stands. Studies from both USA and Patagonia show the same pattern.

There are now six peer-reviewed, independent scientific studies that link timber harvesting with increased risk of fire. There is just one refereed publication that concludes that logging does not increase fire risk. This work examined the 2009 Victorian wildfires but has been heavily criticized as its flawed conclusions do not fit the data presented in the paper. More robust analysis of data from the same Victorian fires showed a clear and highly significant relationship between time since logging and fire severity.

Despite this science, the forestry industry has continued to deny the link between logging and fires. There is no scientific evidence that shows that logging reduces the risk of fire by removing fuels, as claimed by some logging groups. Denial of the impact of logging on fire is a significant public safety issue. The logging of our forests will ultimately cause our landscape to become more flammable, putting our communities and industries at risk.

Rigorous climate models suggest an increase in the length and severity of Australia's fire season, and this of particular concern to us here in Tasmania. Therefore, we need to be doing all that we can to protect ourselves from fire. The science is unrefutable and offers us a real opportunity here to rethink how we manage our forests before the next fire season.

We are calling on all of our Members of Parliament to take the issue of fire seriously and to put the safety of our citizens first. Please listen to what the science is telling us, which is that logging increases the risk of fire. We recommend that the 356,000 ha of Future Potential Production Forests be placed under permanent reservation, as per the recommendations under the Tasmanian Forest Agreement Act 2013. Furthermore, we recommend that the logging of all mature and old-growth cease within the Permanent Timber Production Zone. We make these recommendations for the benefit of public safety.

If you have any further questions about any of this information, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Best wishes,

The Independent Science Council of Tasmania

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