Tasmanians deserve to know what is happening to their services.

A Report on the Impact of Budget Cuts on:

Parks & Wildlife Service

February 2015

Purpose

The aim of this document is to inform Tasmanians about the real impacts of budget cuts on the services they depend upon.

The information included in the report has been collated by the Community & Public Sector Union (CPSU) from discussions with members directly responsible for the provision of these services.

Many of these workers feel they should be speaking out about the way services are being diminished but are effectively gagged by the Hodgman government who has made it clear that public sector workers who speak out will be pursued through formal code of conduct investigations.

Luckily union members have a right to discuss workplace issues with their union and the union has a right to be consulted about changes to work arrangements and practices. The information contained in this report has been collected through these mechanisms.

The CPSU feels there is little point just informing the public about changes to services that have already occurred as this means it’s too late for the community to take action to protect those services.

The report is therefore focused on what staff working at the coal face tell us they reasonably expect will occur when jobs are cut and funding is reduced. No doubt the government will continue its practice of denying there will be any reduction in services but the record is already showing those doing the job are much better placed to tell the public the truth about the real impacts on services than is the government’s media unit.
**Introduction**

Cuts to the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) is not only threatening the loss of cultural and environmental values from our Parks, Reserves and World Heritage Areas but is also placing the health and safety of visitors and staff in jeopardy.

As Parks and Wildlife management pushes ahead with job cuts resulting from a $2.5 million budget cut, staff are desperate to tell the community how further job losses will impact on services.

A Legislative Council inquiry into the operation and administration of the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service released in November 2012 noted the service was then funded at around $10 per hectare of land under management when comparable organisations across the country were funded at more than twice that rate. The report suggested an increase to $16 per hectare would be a more appropriate level of funding. The report also found that any increase in management responsibilities for PWS would require a substantial increase in ongoing resourcing.

In November 2013, 221,000 ha of reserves were transferred from Forestry Tasmania to PWS and an additional 97,000 of new reserves created under the Tasmanian Forest Agreement were also allocated to PWS for management. Funding of $3.5 million was provided to manage these reserves for the financial years 2014/15 – 2017/18. This money was largely used to employ former Forestry Tasmania staff and provide additional staff in field centres responsible for managing the new reserves and to establish an additional fire crew.

In recent times the Tasmanian government has announced policies to open our Parks, Reserves and World Heritage Areas up to greater commercial activity. The World Heritage Plan is being reviewed, a process has been implemented to bring forward business ideas and consideration is being given to allowing greater access to 4WD recreation. All of these things have implication for the workload of PWS staff.

PWS has now indicated staff numbers will need to be reduced by 25 -30 positions to deliver the $2.5 million of savings the government requires this year.

**Impact on Services**

While the PWS Minister Matthew Groom claims that the service ‘has the money to deliver its core business’ and says ‘the organization will still be able to protect and promote Tasmania’s Parks and Wildlife’ staff on the ground have a very different view. When asked what impacts they expected should further PWS jobs be cut they highlighted the following:

Significantly reduced capacity to respond to fire events

As the number of staff falls in field centers the ability of that field center to rapidly and safely deal with wildfires is significantly reduced. PWS is the lead Agency when it comes to responding to fires on land it manages. While PWS have engaged an additional fire crew its focus is on implementing the government’s fuel reduction burning program and can’t substitute for numbers of highly experienced staff, particularly those with specialist incident management team skills, available across field centers especially on days of high fire risk. The reduced firefighting capacity at PWS is exacerbated by the significant reduction in firefighting capacity at Forestry Tasmania and fewer forest contractors with specialized fire rated equipment who have been able to respond to events in the past.
Downgrading in priority for weed management

The encroachment of weeds into Parks and Reserves is a big issue and if left unmanaged can result in a rapid loss of conservation values. All field centres have significant weed management programs but past experience shows that when resources are squeezed tasks such as weed management slide down the priority list. The transfer of former Forestry Tasmania reserves to PWS management has also placed additional urgency on weed management as many of these reserves share boundaries with farm land and other land where weeds are a particular problem and weed seed stocks. If left unmanaged the values for which the reserve has been set aside can quickly be diminished.

Insufficient staff available to safely respond to emergency situations

With visitor numbers to our Parks and Reserves increasing by 11% in 2013/14 and the government aiming to increase it by a further 5% in 2014/15 there are often very high numbers of visitors in these centres. It is not unusual to have 1000 – 1500 tourists in a field centre on a given day doing a whole range of increasingly complex activities. On some occasions there may only be one or two PWS staff on duty – insufficient to respond should an emergency arise.

An example of this would be Lake St Clair. As well as staffing the visitor centre and collecting entrance fees staff are also responsible for cleaning toilets, emptying bins, responding to SES call outs, responding to local and regional accidents including crashes on the Lyell highway, responding to missing walker callouts, responding to fire callouts and liaising with local fire brigade, launching the boat to assist visitors in difficulty further up the lake, supporting and monitoring tourism operators such as the Pumphouse Point resort or the float plane service to the resort and working with a whole range of businesses and volunteer groups.

If a number of issues arise at once staff can be placed in dangerous situations trying to respond alone to those issues and delays in responding put visitors in risky situations.

Reduced capacity to support local tourism operators

Consistent with government policies an increasing number of businesses are basing their activities around our Parks, Reserves and World Heritage Areas. Liaising with tourism operators and ensuring their activities can occur safely, in a manner that is consistent with the conservation values of the area and doesn’t interfere with other users is a complex and increasingly time consuming activity.

Many field centres have at least a dozen regular businesses they support and during peak season this number can be far higher. The government are currently considering 37 business ideas put forward by potential operators and even if only a small percentage of these eventually proceed it will create a large workload for PWS staff particularly in the first few years.

Closure of sites as a result of inability to maintain safe infrastructure

PWS has a number of responsibilities arising under the Civil Liabilities Act 2002. This Act came about as a result of the Cave Creek disaster where a scenic viewing platform in the Paparoa National Park in New Zealand collapsed resulting in the deaths of 14 people. PWS also has an obligation to build and maintain its infrastructure in accordance with the Building Code of Australia.
To comply with its statutory obligations PWS has an engineering inspection program that assesses all raised structures at least once each five years. Where any risk is identified through this program it is up to the local manager to assess the risk and if the risk can’t be removed or mitigated the only option is to close the site. With reduced staffing fewer risks will be able to be addressed and therefore more sites will be closed.

The same risk assessment process applies to roads and tracks. If tree management is not undertaken and the risk of a limb or tree falling over the road or track exists then local managers need to decide how high the risk is and whether the road or track should be closed until proper tree management can occur. This will of course be further delayed if the local, experienced tree faller has just been made redundant or is required to prioritise emptying garbage bins ahead of track maintenance.

Reduced capacity to undertake enforcement activities

Illegal 4WD access, illegal firewood harvesting, the taking of wildlife such as mutton birds, people exercising dogs in wetland reserves or near penguin rookeries and the dumping of rubbish including hazardous materials such as asbestos or chemicals is all on the increase.

Without a comprehensive enforcement program these activities become commonplace and will rapidly diminish the natural and cultural values that our Parks and Reserves are set aside to protect. With a reduction in experienced and authorized staff available in the field centres it is impossible to undertake adequate enforcement activities thereby allowing activities that threaten reserve values to continue unchecked.

Parks & Wildlife Service – Stats at a glance

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<th>Total income ($, 000)</th>
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<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014/15</td>
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<td>2016/17</td>
<td>$50,379*3</td>
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<tr>
<th>Staffing</th>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>285.79 FTE</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>314.54 FTE *4</td>
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Tasmanian Reserve Estate

As at 30 June 2014 the Tasmanian Reserve Estate comprised a total terrestrial reserved area of 3,414,000 hectares, or 50.1% of the area of Tasmania. If Marine Protected Areas are included this increases the total reserve area to 3,607,200 hectares.

*1 plus specific funding of 0.5M for 3 Capes, 3.5M for TFA reserve management and 4M Fuel reduction burns
*2 plus specific funding of 2M for 3 Capes, 3.5M for TFA reserve management, 6.5M Fuel reduction burns and 0.43M Highfield House
*3 plus specific funding of 1M for 3 Capes, 3.5M for TFA reserve management, 9M Fuel reduction burns
*4 increase in FTE resulting from transfer of staff from Forestry Tasmania to manage forest reserves