

Park slash and burn

ALASDAIR MCDONALD

A FORMER National Parks and Wildlife Service employee with 24 years of firefighting experience has spoken out about current staffing changes he believes may lead to future park closures.

Steve Ryan says the region lost years of remote area firefighting experience and heavy plan operation skills earlier this year - right in the middle of fire season and

just ahead of hazard reduction burns.

"There's a ridiculous amount of years of experience that's been relinquished and it's not been replaced," he said.

"There's no younger generation coming through, because it's not something you learn in a book, it's about learning on the ground and picking up on the subtlety of fire behaviour.

"Our crew of three at Tanja

were ready for anything."

Mr Ryan's skills and experience were called on during the Cradle Mountain and Cradle Valley bushfires in Tasmania last year, and he was regularly sent north to help with hazard reduction burns.

He said the service lost a wealth of educated and trained staff after many were told they must reapply for their jobs. "They don't have enough for general duties,

so you throw a fire or natural disaster in the mix and they don't have the staffing to deal with it," he said.

Mr Ryan said more personnel were requested when State Forests were converted to Flora Reserves last year, and handed back to NPWS to manage.

"The area we were covering became a third larger, so we were understaffed, we wanted two staff but only managed to get one," he said.

"There has been one person managing roads and infrastructure from Bermagui to Bega."

With another round of reshuffling expected any moment, he said the anxiety of not knowing took its toll.

"The stress was outlandish, because nobody knew if they had a job and we couldn't get answers," he said.

A spokesperson from the Office of Heritage and Environment confirmed the

next round is currently being organised.

"Structural reform of NPWS is under active consideration by the OEHL executive, and it is intended that an internal announcement around staff consultation on the proposed changes will be made in the near future," they said.

Mr Ryan said temporary contract workers like himself were "the first chips sold off the table".