

## Policy design for wildfire risk management

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“Policy” might be one of the most overused and least understood words in contemporary governance, and a source of significant misunderstanding in emergency management. Policies exist for almost everything, but are rife with ambiguity, indifferent support, and implementation problems. We are not advocating substantive policy, but offering clearer understanding of processes for developing and implementing robust policy, and suggest a common language and framework for considering policy and institutional aspects of emergencies and disasters. Drawing on the forthcoming international *Handbook of Disaster and Emergency Policy and Institutions*, the authors present a series of clear definitions of policy related terms, and synthesises standard public policy models with risk-based approaches to develop a general framework for describing, analysing and prescribing emergency policy. This framework addresses fundamental issues and pitfalls in current conceptions of emergency policy (as opposed to operational emergency management):

- There are distinct types of policy problems in fire and emergency management. Each type has distinct attributes and is amenable to different approaches;
- Addressing all elements of fire and emergency management, including prevention, preparedness and recovery;
- Multiple problem framing and the challenge of policy instrument choice;
- There is pervasive uncertainty. One problem facing the field is the need to make high-stakes strategic and operational decisions with little information.
- The inevitability of politics; is information properly applied in most policy development?
- Issues of learning, building institutional capacities, ownership and communication;
- The need for conducive institutional settings.

These are explored with specific reference to wildfire. The fire and emergency management field faces escalating challenges in part because of global environmental change, but more as a result of demographic, social and economic change – including the role of the private sector and rising political expectations. An improved ability to “speak policy” is required, enabling a greater engagement with strategic policy development. The rewards for successful strategic policy may seem nebulous compared with those from high profile operational action, but events of the last few years in Australia and overseas highlight the need to develop effective strategic policy processes.

### Key Words

Policy, policy design, institutions