

# **Building environmental management into business – what the Country Fire Authority, Victoria, Australia is doing**

**Helen Bull<sup>1</sup>**

1 Country Fire Authority, PO Box 701 Mt Waverley, Victoria, Australia, 3149, h.bull@cfa.vic.gov.au

## **Abstract**

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) is a community-based and community-focused organisation, providing emergency management services to over 2.6 million people in Victoria, Australia.

CFA's Environment Policy commits CFA to deliver its services in a safe, efficient and effective manner while protecting the environment wherever possible for current and future generations.

Work is in progress to help CFA people to achieve this policy commitment.

This paper outlines the approach taken by CFA to build environmental management into normal business practice, and highlights some of the challenges and achievements to date.

## **Introduction**

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) provides emergency management services to over 2.6 million people in Victoria, Australia.

CFA's Environment Policy (CFA 2003) commits CFA to deliver its services in a safe, efficient and effective manner while protecting the environment wherever possible for current and future generations.

CFA's environment program assists CFA brigades and business units to achieve this policy objective. CFA also provides leadership in environmental protection and improvement at the state and national levels.

The work of the Environment Program is guided by the CFA Environment Strategy which was approved by the Board in December 2003 (CFA 2003).

## **The challenges**

'Normalising' environmentally-responsible practices is a key challenge for CFA and other emergency service organisations in Australia.

Emergency services already help to protect the environment by limiting the effects of fire, flood and storms and other incidents. Appropriate management of fire can also improve biodiversity.

However, in many situations, it is not always possible, or seen as possible, to protect the environment while managing the immediate risk to the community. And many of the challenges associated with managing environmental issues are not well understood by the community.

In addition, while many of our members are well-informed, care about the environment, and take steps to manage their impacts, environmental management can be seen as 'an extra thing to do', or 'someone else's (ie the Environmental Manager's) job'.

## **Our approach**

CFA's approach to date has been to help our people to take ownership of environmental issues and build environmental management into business practices that they manage or influence.

We also help the community to better understand some of the challenges associated with environmentally-responsible emergency management, and our achievements.

CFA's Environment Program is broadly based on the international standard for environmental management systems: ISO 14001 (Standards Australia and Standards New Zealand 2004a). The program provides a range of support including:

- advocacy and strategic planning,
- development of tools, including registers of environmental obligations, risks and treatments,
- liaison with environmental organisations and other technical experts,
- internal networking and information sharing,
- technical advice and quality assurance,
- training and mentoring,
- monitoring and review to assist improvement, and
- promotion of achievements.

This paper contains some specific examples of how we have gone about building environmental management into our business.

## **Board and Executive leadership**

In a survey carried out in June 2007, Executive Officers confirmed that they have an important role in leading environmental improvement through:

- visibly modelling environmentally-responsible behaviour,
- ensuring that their business unit implements agreed priorities, and
- driving implementation of the CFA Environment Strategy at a corporate level, including setting of priorities, allocating resources and reviewing progress.

One way in which Executives can demonstrate leadership this year is through implementation of environmental targets included in the Executive Officer Team Objective for 2007-2008. Executives are encouraged to undertake professional development on climate change issues, promote environmental issues to their teams, reduce their own use of energy at work, and complete tasks to support current environmental programs. This initiative has already been successful in raising awareness about how Executives can further encourage environmentally-responsible behaviour.

Implementation of the Environment Strategy will be assisted by quarterly review against the following environmental performance measures contained in the new Corporate Plan (CFA 2007):

- environmental damage as a result of emergencies is minimised,
- emergency management plans address risks to the environment,
- municipal fire management plans address risks to the environment,
- CFA's environmental footprint is restricted to the greatest extent possible, and
- training, policy, guidelines and project documents adequately address environmental risks.

## **Embedding environmental management in guidance, tools and training**

Risks to the environment (land, water, air and biodiversity) are promoted as an important set of risks to be considered in any risk assessment and information on environmental risks and guidance is built into existing documents or processes wherever practical.

For example, all of CFA's Standard Operating Procedures include a section entitled 'Environmental Notes'. Environmental guidance is included in operational training packages as they are updated. It is now included in six operational courses delivered by CFA (Prescribed Burning, Operational Management, Incident Planning, Urban Crew Leader, Supervision of Machinery and Class A Foam).

'Policy owners' are encouraged to take ownership of relevant environmental issues, and supported with strategic-level advice and, where needed, access to specialists. This way, policy owners receive on-the-job learning and are likely to have greater ownership of the outcomes.

For example, in a review conducted to replace our Class B firefighting foam, a contractor assisted the review committee with technical advice on the operational, environmental and economic performance of foam products. The Environmental Manager assisted the review committee with quality assurance.

## **Influencing personal responsibility for reducing waste and resource use**

Numerous initiatives have been implemented in offices and fire stations to reduce waste, increase recycling and to save energy, water and paper. Following consultation with advocates from around the state, these initiatives have been formalised in a program aimed at encouraging personal responsibility for reducing waste and resource use in office settings.

This program is based on the following principles:

- significant reductions in waste, energy, water and paper use (and operating costs) can be made through implementing simple actions (such as switching off computer monitors at the end of the day), and
- long-term improvement in overall environmental performance can be achieved through building capacity of local advocates.

The program is based on 20 actions which have been selected for their effectiveness in reducing environmental impacts, and in engaging staff.

Office teams are encouraged to:

- register with the 'Office Waste and Resource Use Challenge',
- undertake training in influencing environmentally-responsible behaviour,
- work collaboratively to implement the actions,
- build the actions into policy and other guidance at the local and statewide level,
- monitor, report and celebrate their results, and
- contribute to the development of a further 20 actions for implementation by all offices the following year.

One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows assessment of progress in embedding practices. This program will be trialled this year for expansion to fire stations. It is also viewed as an important first step for encouraging participants to consider other ways they can improve their environmental performance.

## **Learning from and supporting brigades**

Numerous brigades and individuals are drivers of environmental improvement in CFA. One of many notable examples is Yanakie Brigade which was a finalist in the prestigious Banksia Environmental Awards in 2004 for their work with local partners in developing and implementing an environmentally-responsible fire management plan for the tourist road leading to Wilson's Promontory National Park; one of Victoria's icons (CFA 2004).

CFA has provided grants to fund small environmental projects by brigades each year since 2003 to help further encourage and support environmental leadership by brigades.

Eighty seven projects have been funded in that time. The funding has helped to reduce waste, save energy and water, and to improve biodiversity. More importantly, the funding has allowed brigades to put some of their ideas into practice, build positive relationships with environmental organisations in their communities, and demonstrate leadership to others in CFA.

Brigade achievements are documented as case studies and promoted in media, training and conferences for others to learn from.

## **Addressing conflicts between community expectations for emergency management and conservation**

In the Victorian statutory planning system the Wildfire Management Overlay (WMO) is an important tool for managing wildfire risk. Areas of high wildfire risk often have high conservation value, which can lead to conflict between competing objectives, and planning controls.

In 2003, CFA initiated a project entitled 'Property bushfire preparedness and native vegetation Management' (Gooding 2007) to provide tools to help reconcile the conflict. This project provides an example of how competing needs for emergency management and conservation can be addressed.

Evaluation of the project to date has indicated the importance of maintaining closer working relationships and communication between regulatory, land management and emergency management agencies, and improving community understanding of the need and basis for wildfire risk and conservation management.

## **Supporting industry-wide approaches**

The AFAC Environmental Management Work Group (EMWG) has been established to assist AFAC agencies to 'work towards best practice in environmental care in all aspects of their business (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery from emergencies, and in infrastructure and support)' (AFAC 2005).

CFA's Chief Officer is the Convenor of the group. CFA is a strong supporter of EMWG as a means of sharing information and normalising responsible environmental management at a national level.

AFAC Council has adopted an interim position on 'Environmental responsibility in emergency management' which was prepared by EMWG. A summary of the position is provided by Rees et al (2007).

The current work of EMWG includes development of guidelines for protecting the environment in structural fire, hazardous materials and other incidents, and working with environmental regulators.

## Conclusion

'Normalising' environmentally-responsible practices is a key challenge for CFA and other emergency service organisations in Australia and around the world. It requires that everyone take responsibility for improving practices at the individual, business unit, corporate and industry level, and will take some time to achieve. It is important that we continue to work collaboratively to accelerate our progress.

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