



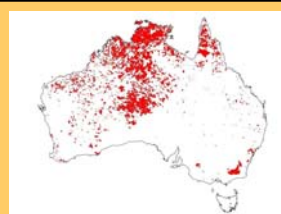
### Fire management and the bush – from an ad hoc seasonal pre-occupation to ‘policy centre-stage’

Gary Morgan, Tony Bartlett & Mike Leonard



### This paper briefly examines:

- Australia’s recent bushfire history;
- The use of protracted third-party Inquiries (and their usefulness) in helping Australia come to terms with the implications of fire;
- Related US strategic analysis, and the increasingly internationally recognised *mega-fire* phenomena; and
- Developments politically and the desire, in some quarters, to want to overly simplify Australia’s recent bushfire experience.



Area burnt 2002 / 2003

Area burnt 1997 - 2003



### Large fires in Australia



- Do they represent a continuance of our cyclic experience with large fires?
- Or is the frequency and scale of large fires changing?

### 2003 Victorian Fires

- 84 lightning caused fires;
- 1.1m ha burnt over 59 days;
- 41 houses destroyed;
- 16,000 personnel involved.



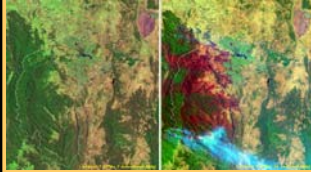
### Subsequent Multiple State & National Reviews

#### Key findings:

- Increase focus on hazard reduction and access on public land, including appropriate budgets;
- Better balance between ‘prevention’ and ‘suppression’;
- Greater training for personnel filling IMT roles;
- Improved building codes for bushfire prone areas; and
- Greater focus on the impacts of climate change.

## 2003 ACT Fires

- 6 lightning strikes in National Parks;
- Fires burnt 157,000 ha over 10 days;
- killed 4 people;
- burnt 487 homes; and
- Cotter water catchment burnt.



## 2003 ACT Fires

### Three Inquiries – Key Findings:

- Fires not unique – predictable given heavy fuels;
- Need for aggressive suppression strategies;
- Substantially more strategic fuel reduction required;
- Lack of access hindered initial and indirect suppression strategies;
- Inadequate advice provided to community;
- Greater need for urban interface planning and building standards; and
- Conflicts over firefighter safety and effective suppression.

## And nationally?

- The period 1998 - 2004 has seen an unprecedented level of scrutiny of the management of bushfires, particularly in Victoria, ACT, NSW and SA.
- Council of Australian Governments initiated a *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management 2003*;
- House of Representatives Select Committee (Nairn) 2003



## The USA Experience

- Large fires common in past, but limited by aggressive fire control efforts;
- Catastrophic wildfires recently have begun increasing, in the 1994, 1996, 2000, 2002 and 2006 fire seasons;
- Since 1998, over 200 wildfires greater than 20,000 hectares have occurred, with more than 16 large, highly destructive wildfires considered *mega-fires*;
- Biscuit fire in Oregon in 2003 cost \$150m to suppress;
- California spends \$3 billion/yr on fire
  - yet in 2003 more than 3,600 houses destroyed, and 22 lives lost in fires.

## What are Mega-Fires?

- Concept arises from the US Forest Service / Brookings Institution analysis;
- involve fire behaviour that exceeds all efforts at control, regardless of the type, or number of firefighting resources deployed;
- represent only 0.1% of all US forest fires, yet account for 95% of the area burnt and 85% of the total fire suppression costs;
- often burn into the urban interface zone where there are very high asset values.



## USA Mega Fire Strategic Analysis

- over accumulation of vegetation fuels;
- in later-age, unhealthy forests;
- often impacting the rural-urban interface;
- land mgt and interface planning needed.
- predicted increasing costs of suppression with the same approach to wildfires;
- *Mega fires* may be predictable and preventable.

## ...Australia in 2007

- 2006/07 season – another 1+ million hectares burnt in Victoria; fires in Pillaga NSW, WA, Tas & large areas in northern Aust.
- Suppression costs are increasing as the area of prescribed burning in southern Australia continues to decrease;



- Climate change is, at times, becoming an excuse to avoid debate on the underlying issues;
- Not all of the 2003 COAG Inquiry recommendations have been implemented.



- Currently, national policy responsibility for fire management sits with several Ministerial Councils including;
- 'Natural Resource Management' (NRM),
- 'Primary Industries' (PIMC) and
- 'Australian Police Ministers' (APMC)



## National Issues

- Resourcing levels for park and forest management;
- The use of prescribed fire;
- Extent and value of assets in urban interface;



## National Issues

- Fire behaviour expertise;
- Firefighter safety, risks and legal aspects;
- Escalating use of technology;
- Climate change.



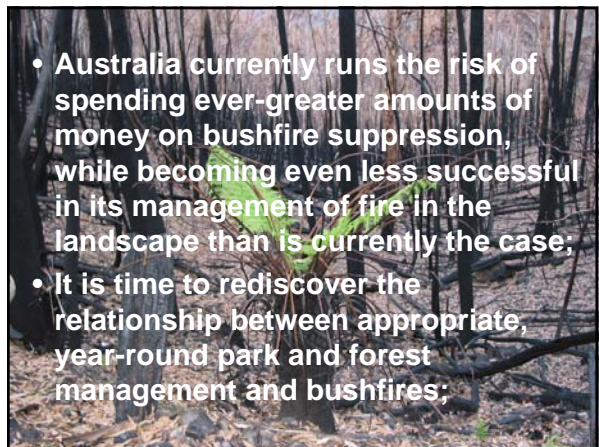
In southern Australia, it would seem to be 'decision time'.

Either; we fundamentally change our approach; or continue on the current path, with probable escalating consequences.



**It is actually about Land Management.....**

- Australia currently runs the risk of spending ever-greater amounts of money on bushfire suppression, while becoming even less successful in its management of fire in the landscape than is currently the case;
- It is time to rediscover the relationship between appropriate, year-round park and forest management and bushfires;



**.....Think Nationally, Act Locally**

Australia urgently needs to develop a national approach to the management of growth in the rural-urban interface and better ways of sharing the risks and costs associated with fire in the interface areas;

Fire management is the fundamental element to addressing Australia's environmental issues.



**Fire and land management policy must continue to be underpinned by quality research.**



**.....Think Nationally, Act Locally**