



Strategic policy choice in wildfire management: Matching the policy with the objective

John Handmer
Bushfire CRC &
Centre for Risk and Community Safety
RMIT University
www.bushfirecrc.com

Confronting wildfires

Recent fires have seen:

- massive war-like efforts on suppression;
- mass evacuations;
- weather conducive to extreme fire conditions; and
- failure to extinguish the flames or arguably to significantly reduce losses.

In addition, suppression or the practice of fire control has escalated in cost and complexity especially with aerial fire fighting appliances. Many fires are followed by calls for further investment in fire-fighting capacity, and demands for increased fuel reduction burning.

The policy response – in history and now

- The war on wildfire - In 1910 the US federal government moved to “declare war on wildfires” and the USFS to declare fire suppression its primary charge.
- Fire “prevention” in the form of fuel management and sound land management practices received less attention, but is now back on the agenda.

Why are we fighting fires?

What are the objectives of fire fighting groups?

- To put out the fire - a focus on the flames?
- To reduce fuel - focus on vegetation?
- Reduce losses – focus on people and property? The real objective.
- It is a paradox that many fire agencies will call for the wildfire risk to be shared with those at risk while at the same time insisting on evacuation – often the most risky option and one that generally renders home occupiers passive in the face of a fire.

Resourcing the objectives

- Putting out the fire - 70% of funds in EU/USA;
- Fuel management – 25-29% of funds;
- People and property (“Community safety”) - maybe 1%. 4% in Australia.

The problem with this:

- 4-8 kW/m – limit of fire fighting
- 80 kW/m – major forest fire.
- Fuel reduction has a decreasing influence as weather becomes more extreme

So these “traditional” approaches have serious limitations.

The real objective & the traditional approaches

- The real objective of wildfire management is protecting people and property – but the evidence shows that there are practical and economic limitations to achieving this through sole reliance on the traditional approaches

Why not focus explicitly on people and property?

- Does not have to mean much less emphasis on suppression or fuel management.
- In Australia, modest funds are used to leverage from those at risk. The objectives being: gardens and **houses relatively resistant to ignition**; and **people knowledgeable and confident about what to do** to minimise their own risk.
- Based on historical evidence showing that **houses can survive wildfires** with some preparation, and that the **single most important factor in house survival is the presence of able bodied occupants** who proactively defend the structure against embers. This is NOT “shelter in place”.
- Also evidence that people are relatively safe inside a house during the passage of a fire front – and conversely that the most dangerous place to be is outside,



Conclusion

- This is not a panacea, but at the current level of resourcing and knowledge, offers a potentially very cost effective approach to improving outcomes in wildfires in terms of our fundamental objectives: protecting people, property and livelihoods;
- With increasing climate induced fire risk, the approach deserves more attention;
- Change may require agencies to examine their fundamental purpose.