

Communicating With the Community: Walk the Talk

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Abstract

In December 2003 a wildland fire started in a radiata pine plantation under severe and unstable weather conditions. This fire occurred to the north and west of the community of Bridgetown, Western Australia. It impacted on some 4600 hectares of plantation and remnant vegetation, on farms and native eucalypt forest before entering the urban rural interface some 5 hours later. The head fire traveled at rates of spread up to 4 kilometers per hour. The speed of the fire allowed little time to warn those in its path including the Bridgetown community. Rightly or wrongly, fires that suddenly impact on a community with little warning usually bring about strong criticism of fire agencies involved. However, following this fire there was very little criticism of the fire agencies. In fact the community reaction was more of appreciation for efforts well done. Fire agencies then questioned why this fire was so unusual in this regard. Upon analysis, it was agreed that the communication strategies and links established and utilised during and after the event were the key to its success from a community perspective. The poster put summarises the communication strategies developed for this incident and outlines how they were implemented during and after the incident.

The Authors

Greg McKay is currently the Fire and Emergency Services Regional Director South West Region of Western Australia. Greg commenced his career at the Forest Department Cadet School in 1967, graduating in 1969. He has lived and worked in various Forest Department work centres through out the South West of Western Australia prior to joining the Bush Fires Board in 1978. Up to 1984 he worked on a variety of projects, including the Avon Valley Fire Protection Plan and the "Denbarker" Crown land program, prior to becoming the District Liaison Officer for the then Swan Region on the outer fringes of the Perth metropolitan area. Promoted to Regional Manager for the South West in 1984, he subsequently moved to Bunbury in 1986. The formation of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) in 1998 seen him appointed to the position of Fire Services Regional Director for the South West. Further reviews in 2003 also saw the State Emergency service come under his portfolio. The South West Directorate covers a total area of some 29000 sq kilometres and provides a service to 16 Local Governments, 2 career Fire and Rescue stations, 159 Volunteer Bushfire Brigades, 21 Volunteer Fire and Rescue Brigades and 15 Volunteer State Emergency Service Units. Greg has 11 staff working under his control. During his career, Greg has managed numerous large incidents across WA as well leading interstate deployments (on 2 occasions) of WA fire-fighters to support the fire fighting efforts during the devastating New South Wales fires in 1994 and 2001.

Terry Maher has been employed with the Western Australian Government since 1967. The role has been an operational one in land management including both forest

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production and conservation with a continual annual component of fire. Terry's experience ranges from that gained in a fire crew, specializing then in aviation and then all aspects of fire management from a regional and state perspective. Terry's current employment (since 1992) is as the Senior Fire Operations Officer for the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). The Department is responsible for about 24 million hectares of conservation and production lands as well as the pre-suppression responsibilities for a further 89 million hectares of naturally vegetated lands. Terry has participated in a Fire Management Study Tour of both Canada and the United States. Terry also had a significant involvement with the Australian & New Zealand deployment of fire fighters to the USA in 2000, spending time initially in Montana and then coordinating the contingent from Boise. Terry is currently a Nationally Accredited Incident Controller, Trainer and Work Place Assessor. He is the current chair of the Australian and New Zealand Fire Equipment Officers Group, Chairman of the Aviation Reference Group for the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, Chairman of the Western Australian Aerial Fire Suppression Group and a Member of the Western Australian Bushfire Consultative Committee for the State Fire and Emergencies Services Authority. Terry is a recipient of Australia's National Medal.