

→ Dealing with extreme bushfires

What can Australian fire and land managers learn from the US concept of mega-fires?

In recent years, a few extraordinary wildfires in the United States have required an enormous suppression response, but nonetheless, resulted in unprecedented loss and threats to private property and natural resources. These are called mega-fires.

Mega-fires are extraordinary, in terms of their size, complexity, and resistance to control. They often burn into the wildland-urban interface and invariably break out when other wildfires are already stretching firefighting capacity. They occur in areas with heavy fuel loads following years of drought, insect infestations and disease. They burn under extreme fire weather conditions and exceed all efforts at conventional control, until relief in weather or a break in fuel occurs.

Mega-fires are a situation as much as they are an incident. Those affected often want to know why the fire became so destructive, how it escaped efforts at control, and who is to blame. The intensity of these wildfires tends to place firefighters on the defensive and put managers in a reactive mode. While fire managers are under pressure to reduce costs, public and political influences almost always pressure them to “do more”.

US wildfire expert Jerry Williams visited Australia last month at the invitation of the Bushfire CRC and AFAC to conduct a series of workshops with Australian fire and land managers on the mega-fire phenomenon. Williams is the former National Director, Fire Management and Aviation for the USDA Forest Service from 2001 to 2005 and is currently Senior Advisor to the Brookings Institution on public policy aspects of major fires.

According to Williams, the fact that these massive, so-called mega-fires are occurring is especially vexing



because wildfire preparedness funding in the US has never been higher, and has been significantly increasing each year. More firefighters, more modern equipment, a better-trained workforce, and improved predictive services have all been brought to bear, but, still, five western US states have suffered the largest wildfires on record since 2000. One of these incidents, the Biscuit Fire in Oregon in 2002 cost more than \$US150 million to suppress.

Although wildland fire suppression policy has always attempted to match increasing wildfire threat with greater suppression force, it has become clear that there are limits to firefighting capabilities, regardless of funding level.

Williams argues that it would be a mistake to view these trends in wildfire size, cost, loss, and damage as an anomaly. He lists several contributory factors that indicate otherwise including:

- The rate of wildland fuel accumulation remains far greater than the rate of fuel treatment
- Population growth and development pressure is occurring at the interface between urban areas and the wildlands.
- Public expectations for the land discourage or exclude activities that might reduce fuel loadings.



→ Outcomes

Williams calls for more emphasis on managing both the condition of the land and the growth of the wildland-urban interface. This will require fire professionals to look beyond fire services and more fully engage land management planners and community leaders.

Find more at www.bushfirecrc.com

- ▲ JERRY WILLIAMS SPOKE ACROSS AUSTRALIA AT WORKSHOPS SUCH AS THOSE IN CANBERRA, ABOVE, AND MELBOURNE, LEFT.