

Bushfire Investigation: an all-agencies integrated approach

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OVERVIEW

Whilst bushfire suppression is of key importance, greater emphasis should be placed on the investigation of their causes. The fact that, in the majority of cases, fires are caused by humans means that they are potentially preventable. The proposition is that a strong relationship between police, fire and land management agencies, including well understood protocols of responsibility and efficient information sharing, can increase capacities for the successful bushfire investigation. The investigation of bushfires, and the subsequent treatment of causes, is likely to lead to fewer fires and hence a reduction in their impact on people and the environment.

AIM

Through international comparative research, the project aims to identify strengths and weaknesses in sharing knowledge between bushfire investigative related agencies.



METHODOLOGY

Internal practices and procedures in undertaking bushfire investigation were examined in six investigative departments of two countries; Italy and Australia (Victoria). Using focus groups, face to face interviews and policy analysis I have focused on strengths and weaknesses of bushfire investigative departments in relation to the extent and quality of their sharing of knowledge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do organizations deal with post bushfire investigation?
2. How can organizations structure themselves to deal effectively with a post bushfire investigation?
3. Should there be an international dimension to such investigation actions?
4. What are the conditions that enable or prevent effective collaboration in bushfire investigation?

THE END-USERS VIEW

“The Victorian experience has shown that when all the relevant agencies work closely together, much more can be achieved. However it can still improve further, particularly in the area of gathering and sharing intelligence. Hopefully an all agencies approach will ensure all agencies work closely together and prevent many fires from occurring”.

Les Vearing

State Wildfire Investigation and Training Coordinator
Department of Environment and Primary Industries (Victoria, Australia)

“This research, which identifies the features and benefits of collaborative and effective bushfire investigation and enables more thorough analysis of bushfire cause trends, is a welcome initiative to better inform bushfire prevention strategies”.

Damien Killalea

Director, Community Fire Safety
Tasmania Fire Service (Tasmania, Australia)

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Who the typical bushfire investigator is

A man aged between 40 and 60; someone that has a strong level of commitment and loyalty to his agency, having been employed by the same organization for more than 20 years.

What kind of skills and/or attitudes s/he needs to provide

In Australia, bushfire investigators are more skewed towards technical and process orientated skills (knowledge and experience – analytical mind). In Italy, bushfire investigators give equal importance to both technical (knowledge and experience) and social skills (communication and social abilities).

How s/he utilizes his/her knowledge in practice

The ability of the investigators to “improvise”, based on their personal working experience, is an integral, if not preferred, part of the investigator’s role; tacit knowledge (personal initiative and creative input) is considered more valuable than explicit knowledge (rules and protocols) by the majority of bushfire investigators.

How s/he shares knowledge with others

For all investigative departments written communications (such as reports, guidelines and emails) are the most common way of communication from the organization to its employees. However, such written communication remain the least appreciated by investigators: “not read, misinterpreted and too slow a process”;

Police investigators tend to dedicate more working time to sharing their knowledge (over 50% of time). In contrast, fire agency investigators seem to spend less time for such exchange (less than 20%).