

The Unquenchable Bushfire Bureaucracy

By Roger Underwood, Quadrant Online, 4 December 2014.

The end of that great Australian institution, the volunteer country fire brigade, is drawing nigh, done in the ignorance of greens, the ambitions of empire-building desk warriors and layer after counterproductive layer of managerialist protocols. Why use a rake when the taxpayers can be billed for a helicopter?

White Overalls Days

I have been reading [Geoff Walker's wonderful little book *White Overalls Days*](#). It is a modest, but entertaining collection of yarns about his time as a member of the Lemon Tree Passage Bushfire Brigade in central coastal NSW in the 1980s. Although I enjoyed it, I was left with a feeling of sadness as I turned the last page. Geoff's story is told light-heartedly, but it is essentially a tragedy. This is because he describes a process that has been replicated all over Australia to the detriment of our society and our environment: the bureaucratisation of bushfire management.

Geoff's time with the Lemon Tree Passage brigade typifies an unhappy transition. His early days coincided with the times when local volunteers, with local leadership, organised themselves to go about the business of preventing and fighting bushfires and carrying out fuel reduction burning. They did a great job, and they had fun. By the time he gave it away, the locals had become merely a small cog in a large city-based organisation, led in many cases by people with no real bushfire experience, mired in bureaucracy, and beholden to the political influence of environmentalists. The fun had gone out of it, replaced by the grim business of fighting fires of increasing intensity and danger, due to a lack of basic prevention. ([Geoff Walker wrote of his time fighting fires and bureaucracy for Quadrant Online in October](#))

Fuel-reduction burning program

I have been part of a similar transition. I can remember the days (in 1964) when I was a junior forester with the WA Forests Department, working at Dwellingup in the central jarrah forest. We had a big fuel-reduction burning program, and it was well organised and professionally carried out. Every proposed burn had to be inspected and a prescription prepared that laid out the way the burn would be done and the conditions that must apply on the day. The aim was to get a good burn, but to do no damage. Preparing burn prescriptions was one of my jobs, and I used to do about four a day. For each burn I would do a field inspection and then fill in a one-page form. The forms would be handed in to my boss, DFO Frank Campbell, who would check them over, occasionally make an adjustment, and then approve and sign them. The prescriptions were then given to the field staff whose job it was to do the burns on the days when conditions were as prescribed. It became a little more sophisticated after the advent of aerial burning, but not much.

Compare this with the modern system. The last time I looked at the department's burn prescription form it was 75 pages in length. Every burn requires a mini-management plan. The entire emphasis has changed 180 degrees, from the outcome of getting a burn completed, to

the process of doing the prescription. For example, one of the aspects the prescribing officer must consider is a detailed risk analysis, including the political risks of the burn. Each prescription must be sent to head office (via the district and regional office), and up to nine different senior officers must sign off on it before it is approved, including directors who have no practical bushfire experience whatsoever.

First check for endangered plant species

Most laughable of all, it is a requirement that every proposed burn must be checked to see whether endangered plant species are present. If they are, a special application must be prepared and presented to the Minister for the Environment. This is the same minister who has jurisdiction over the department wanting to do the burn, and as he does not know an endangered plant from a cow, he relies on information from the department to make his decision. This is always to approve the burn. Never once has an application for ministerial permission to undertake a fuel reduction burn been rejected. Well, that's good and sensible (there are no species of plants in the Jarrah forest that are threatened with extinction by a mild-intensity fuel reduction burn), but this is a story about bureaucracy, not good sense.

All in all, the preparation and approval process for one fuel-reduction burn in the Jarrah forest (which might have taken me two hours in 1964), now can take weeks and can involve up to 12 different officers and even the minister. There is no evidence to suggest that the outcome is better burning, but it is certainly *less* burning. I suspect that the main advantage of the new system, at least from the departmental viewpoint, is that accountability is now spread so thinly that it will be impossible to find anyone to blame if something goes wrong.

Old-fashioned bushfire management

Meanwhile the old-fashioned and economical method of bushfire management (fuel-reduction burning on the one hand, followed by hand attack of fires by crews with rakes, hoses and shovels on the other) are being replaced by modern and obscenely expensive methods, usually involving helicopters.

There was a classic demonstration of this in a recent, mind-bogglingly awful program on bushfires on SBS television. In a scene in the first episode, a fleet of helicopters (I counted four in the air at the one time in one scene) were looking for lightning strikes in the Blue Mountains. A smouldering log is spotted and a team of park rangers are winched down to deal with it. The log, which is about the size of a power pole, is burning at one end. This is cut off with a chainsaw, leaving a smouldering butt piece about the size of a kerosene tin. The head ranger reaches for his walkie-talkie. "Send in The Bucket!" he commands. A moment later a helicopter carrying a few thousand litres of water choppers in and releases the water onto the burning remnant. I estimated that this operation cost several hundred dollars. Back in the day, the offending piece of wood, having been knocked off with a crosscut, would have been buried, using a shovel. Cost: nothing. Presumably modern park rangers are not capable of using a shovel, or are not allowed to under Health and Safety rules, a further example of bureaucracy gone mad.

Preventative burning prevented

Everybody knows what is going on. Bushfire brigades are no longer doing the preventative burning that they used to do to minimise bushfire damage in rural communities. They are submerged in a system in which constraints are layered over constraints, where their work is opposed by environmentalists and made more difficult by local Shires. Firefighters no longer go in to deal with a fire edge using rake, hose and shovel – they are instructed to stay out and wait for the fleet of water bombers to arrive. The tiny number of foresters still left in forest districts in the south-west are fuming with frustration as they confront a system that is all about process and nothing about outcome. Local communities are rumbling with discontent.

But the forces at work are inexorable. It's basically the old power game, the shots now being called by the bureaucrat in his suit or flashy uniform in head office, with the ear of the minister and an eye to political advantage. Meanwhile the boys in the bush in their white overalls, good with a rake and a hose, but without political power or influence, are increasingly losing the faith.

End of the volunteer bushfire brigade

I foretell the end of that great Australian institution, the volunteer bushfire brigade, with its captain, secretary and treasurer, their fire station, their membership drawn from the local community, their admired status and their pride and *esprit de corps*. They will be bureaucratised out of existence. We will end up with the American system of paid and uniformed firefighters, operating out of the cities or the larger regional centres so as to minimise costs, lacking local knowledge and constrained from preventative burning by environmentalists operating within government departments or shire councils.

This has certainly been the pattern with government bushfire management in WA. District centres have been closed, staff shifted to regional centres, not replaced — or replaced by officers who play no part in bushfire operations. About 20 years ago you would find a large corps of professional foresters and highly experienced field staff in district offices in places such as Dwellingup and Manjimup. Now they are virtual ghost towns. Meanwhile the burning program has declined to about 30% of where it should be, as field staff grapple with the absurd bureaucratic constraints imposed upon them, and dangerous bushfire fuels are now more extensive than ever before in history.

Two tragedies

There are, in fact, two tragedies in all this. First there is the tragedy that an economical system that worked has been replaced by an expensive one that does not. The second is that the changes have a sort of ghastly momentum to them: everybody can see what is going on, but nobody seems able or willing to do anything about it. The most disastrous changes seem somehow to be irreversible.

Over the years ahead there will be an increase in the number and nastiness of bushfires in southern Australia. Global warming will be offered as the explanation, as well as the excuse. But the truth is different: once effective management and community systems have been dismantled, and the result is a countryside utterly exposed to unstoppable wildfires. We are reaping what has been sown.

Reference: Walker, Geoff (2002): *White Overall Days*. Newcastle City Printers

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