Central West Bush Fire Management Project: community consultation for local ownership of risk management planning

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Abstract: Following a significant fire event in Goobang National Park, in the Central West of NSW in 2001/2002, the local fire management community reviewed its risk management plan. The Goobang Fire highlighted many shortcomings in the plan including a lack of practical on-ground fire management solutions, poor integration across land tenures and limited community support due to a lack of understanding and input during its formulation. Through the local Bush Fire Management Committee (Canobolas BFMC) a new approach to risk planning has been developed that helps solve these issues.

Two guiding principles have driven the process. The first is a landscape, tenure blind approach to risk management planning. For the first time the performance of agencies, landholders, brigades and the Canobolas BFMC as a whole can be measured and assessed objectively, based on principles that meet community protection and ecological key performance indicators simultaneously.

The second principle has been the commitment to a change in the community consultation process. Traditionally agencies have interpreted community participation as "informing" the public of a pre-determined decision. Canobolas BFMC has taken the approach of "collaborating" with and involving the community in developing alternatives and identifying the preferred solution. We have held 50 community meetings over the last 12 months, consulting with over 2000 people. This has led to greater levels of problem ownership by all participants and a more durable, workable solution between all parties.

The Central West Bush Fire Management Project has recognised the inevitable nature of conflict and, at the same time, its potential to generate positive outcomes. This paper outlines the difficulties encountered and the successes in equalising the negotiating powers of disputing parties, drawing to the surface underlying concerns, encouraging equal ownership of outcomes, negotiating collaboratively and fixing systems rather than people. This is a discussion regarding the future direction of fire management risk planning and the lessons learnt from the application of this process in the Central West of NSW.

1.   INTRODUCTION

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."
                                    (Covey, 2000)

During the 2001/2002 fire season the Central West of N.S.W. experienced a large and destructive landscape scale bush fire. This fire ignited in Goobang National Park from a lightning strike and burnt in two phases. It burnt 30 000 ha from 3rd December 2001 until late January 2002 taking seven weeks to contain. Significantly, it broke containment lines on the afternoon of the 17th December 2001 and burnt into pastoral and cropping country to the east of the reserve. Under severe weather conditions it burnt 15 000 ha in approximately 7 hours, covering a distance of 15 km, burning pastoral country and crops. There were significant livestock and fence losses with some sheds also burnt. No homes were lost and only one fire fighter sustained minor injuries. The social impact on the community was profound and immediate. Rightly or wrongly, the "Goobang Fire" came to highlight failings of fire management policies on public lands in NSW.

The stark reality that we faced as fire managers after this event was that the local rural community was disillusioned with the fire management process. They were disenfranchised from the fire risk management process and sceptical that they could have any real or meaningful input into the process. Soon after the fire concluded the rural community mobilised political support and called for a state-wide ban on all volunteer brigade members participating in fire fighting efforts on public lands until "locals had more of a say". The face of this state-wide movement was the Goobang Fire. Issues ranged from lack of local input into operational incident management at bush fires, greater use of prescription burning and inadequate fire trail standards. There were also issues about the awkward coordination of fires and planning across local government boundaries and between land tenures. These issues became politically divisive, polarised the fire debate in Central West NSW and has culminated in the affected landowners from the Goobang Fire taking legal action against the State Government for losses incurred. The NSW Farmers Association is supporting this action.

It was in this context that the Central West Bushfire Management project had its beginnings. All land management agencies in the Central West felt pressure to resolve these outstanding issues and were willing to try a new approach in an attempt to find a sustainable solution. The genesis was in and around the Goobang Landscape but the concepts quickly found support and spread to other communities within the Central West. We applied a new fire risk management planning framework to the entire Canobolas Zone Bushfire Management Committee (BFMC) area, and adjacent BFMC's, an area of over 2 million hectares. Our principles included zoning the landscape into fire management zones on a tenure-blind, whole of landscape basis covering national park, state forest, crown land and private property.

This paper sets out how we used a comprehensive community consultation process to find common ground on fire management issues. It sets out as a case study how we facilitated the process in the hope that it will be of use to other fire managers and community members seeking consensus on fire management issues.

2.   FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The Central West Bushfire Management Project used the Fire Management Planning Strategy (NPWS, 2003) as the basis for determining fire management zones and strategies throughout the landscape. Space prevents detailed discussion in this paper. In summary the process defines fire management zones as either *Asset Protection Zones (APZ)*, *Strategic Fire Advantage Zones (SFAZ)* or *Land Management Zones (LMZ)*.

APZ and SFAZ's are managed with the objectives of protecting life & property and stopping the spread of uncontrolled fire throughout the landscape. That is, these zones meet community protection objectives. LMZ's ensure appropriate ecological fire regimes are used by applying patchwork prescribed burning, ensuring that upper and lower fire frequency thresholds are met. Its aims are to meet ecological objectives in fire management.

All zones have objective criteria set for them and are measurable. Any member of the fire management community can see at a glance if they, or others, are meeting the criteria and so gauge performance against strategies that have been set.

This approach is similar to approaches used by other fire management agencies across Australia including the Department of Sustainability and the Environment in Victoria (DSE, 2004) and South

East Queensland Bushfire and Biodiversity Consortium (Griffith University, 1998).

3. WHY COLLABORATE WITH THE COMMUNITY?

What are the objectives of collaboration? Why should agency staff complicate their lives by reaching out to groups outside agency boundaries? Why should members of the community spend time in meetings interacting with people with whom they have been in conflict?

The best answer to these questions is the simplest: Collaboration can lead to better decisions that are more likely to be implemented and better prepare agencies and communities for future challenges. Collaboration builds understanding, support and capacity. Fire management strategies are more likely to be implemented successfully if they are owned and supported by affected groups. Involving the entire community in the decision-making process enhances the capacity of all to deal with future problems. This is highly relevant in meeting community protection objectives in fire management, where we plan for infrequent yet potentially highly destructive events. We can also use this approach to meet ecological objectives on private property, goals that are often deemed too hard to meet or be influenced by outsiders.

Without collaboration, land managers are placed in an impossible situation. They need to make decisions that rely on an increasingly large base of information, but they do not control all necessary information. They want to make the "right choice" but increasingly find that there is no clear technical solution. They need to make credible and legitimate decisions but can not hope to understand how to balance the social values that the public assigns to decisions that affect natural resources. They require political leaders and the wider community to support their decisions but are unlikely to obtain support without active and meaningful involvement by stakeholders in decision-making.
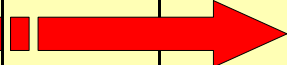
Managers also need resources to carry out implementation of plans but are unlikely to receive it unless they can show it is part of a wider landscape plan.

In a more profound way they also need their agencies to grow as public values and knowledge change, yet are caught in bureaucratic efforts to hold onto past modes of action (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000).

Public agencies have inordinate power to avoid seeking or considering community input. Collectively, government has the ability to ignore, coerce and force its own agenda in isolation from stakeholders. Many authors have documented this effect in environmental disputes and the so called 'victims of state coercion' (Tidwell, 1998). This is not to suggest that it is necessarily a malicious act on behalf of agencies to carry out decision-making in isolation, but rather it is done so in the misdirected belief that it will simplify the issues faced by public land managers. This simply will not work.

The other reason cited for a lack of public participation in the decision-making process is lack of community interest. As the shift in focus for fire management moves from reactive suppression, with a red truck on every property and street corner, toward a stronger emphasis on proactive prevention we must emphasise the responsibility that all community members must play in taking greater responsibility for their own safety. The ability to change behaviour is directly related to an individual perceived level of risk. A lack of perceived risk leads to a poor participation or interest in fire safety activities and risk planning. If a person believes that they can handle a situation it is unlikely that

Table 1: The Promise of Community Participation

Promise of Community Participation				
INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
Inform	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Collaborate**	**Empower**
Promise to the Public	Promise to the Public	Promise to the Public	Promise to the Public	Promise to the Public
We will keep you informed	Listen to your concerns	Concerns and issues help shape decision-making process	Use concerns and issues to formulate solutions	Place final decision-making in the hands of the public

they will be motivated to change their behaviour, particularly when there is a high cost associated with the change in behaviour (Odgers, 2002). The only way out of this dilemma is to work with the community to get past indifference and disinterest. Working with communities, collaborating and building capacity, will inform and give an accurate picture of risk.

Whether the primary driver for collaboration is developing sustainable government / community relationships or enhancing community understanding of fire risk it is important that participation is moved from the traditional 'informing' role that agencies take in relation to fire risk management planning. Table 1 sets out a continuum of public participation in decision-making. The aim for the project was to move participation from *informing* to *collaborating*.

This approach has shown to be successful in resolving other natural resource conflicts. Prystupa (1998) examined a case in New Zealand where collaborative co-management of an area with a Maori group was successful because decisions included resource 'users' and not just resource managers. It moved away from the top-down informing approach typical of governments, while legitimising local concerns. Blair and Feary (1995) looked at similar issues in relation to the Regional Forest Assessments of eastern Victoria. They found that the recognition that local communities and outside stakeholders had a stake in decision-making processes was essential to getting sustainable and durable solutions.

We moved the debate on fire management in the Central West from *informing* to *collaboration*. As we will see this has had an important effect on the community. We did not move all the way to *empowerment*, because by moving as far as we did in one step challenged existing organisational structures and policies. It also challenged the existing power base of some stakeholder groups. There are elements in all stakeholder groups, on both sides of the debate, that attempt to marginalise the other side. Claims by a strong stakeholder that all others are "self-interested" and will "hijack" the process need to be closely managed. The reality is that domination of the collaborative process by one stakeholder group over all others is detrimental and results in unsustainable outcomes.

It is unlikely that we would have been successful if we had moved from *informing* to *empowering* in

one step, but is an area that we are interested in working toward in the future.

Commissioner Koperberg, NSW Rural Fire Service, and Commissioner Mullins, NSW Fire Brigades, both commented at the RFSA Conference (Bathurst, June 2004) on the need to improve community engagement. They stated "fire managers must work toward cooperative solutions that meet the interests of each local community". To come up with a plan in isolation, to inform, is doomed to failure and leaves all public agencies open to severe and justified criticism. We believe that the project addresses this very issue.

4. MAKING COMMUNITY COLLABORATION WORK

Efforts to work with the community, bridging the divide between agencies and stakeholder groups are difficult at the best of times. It takes a lot of care and effort to make sure partnerships survive. We have developed four broad criteria that were critical to our success in the Central West.

4.1. Assess the potential for action

Change does not just happen spontaneously and often it takes a high level of discomfort or a significant event to prompt action. We had such an event with the Goobang Fires. The experience made the entire community sit up, think and critically examine fire management strategies. It made us realise the inadequacies we, as an entire community, had in relation to fire management. Risk management plans did not adequately quantify, identify or provide pragmatic guidance for on ground works for managers or land owners. Volunteers, who faced large fires on an infrequent basis, realised they did not understand the ICS system well enough to have meaningful input. Land management agencies realised they had consistently taken an insular, tenure based approach to land management.

Canobolas Zone also embraced cultural change that the leadership of the Rural Fire Service has been implementing over the last few years. Zoning across four local government areas improved the strategic perspective of the local leadership. For the first time a landscape perspective was possible and we moved away from the limiting ourselves to considering issues in our own 'patch' with no interaction with adjacent areas. Rather than finding reasons why organisational change would not work, the new structures have been used to advantage in

improving momentum and enthusiasm throughout the agencies and community.

Our potential for action increased enormously post the Goobang Fires, with three conditions contributing to this. First, it created a unified and committed leadership group, focussed on strategic issues, within the fire fighting community in the Central West. This group was comprised of members from multiple agencies, leading the process and developing a vision for fire management. Second, we could see clear opportunities to improve the 'business' of fire management in the region. We knew where our weaknesses lay, what was required to fix it and how we could go about it. Success depended on cooperative action. Finally, we had energised people. We had all been content to let the status quo remain, it was comfortable and despite an underlying knowledge that things were not perfect, it was all too difficult to do anything about. The Goobang fires energised people into action and quickly, as an entire community, we took the decision that it was no longer acceptable to live with inadequate fire management practices or strategies.

As we have travelled around and discussed with others the reasons behind the change that is taking place in the Central West a common argument against implementing this process elsewhere is that "we have not had a Goobang Fire to create interest in change". Instead of finding reasons why something can not happen, fire managers need to make the commitment to engage, to drive change, before disaster strikes. We emphasise to fire managers in other areas to ask themselves and examine why a proactive approach to problem solving should not happen. It can be a challenge to create energy throughout the community, but the effort involved in doing this is much less that dealing with the aftermath of a large fire, coronial enquiries and court cases.

Creating the potential for action may not be as hard as many think. You do not have energised, motivated people in your area? Become one yourself. Seek out those who have the communication skills to convey a positive message. The leadership is not interested in change? Have issues such as this been openly discussed before in a small forum? Often they have not, so get the leadership together as a first step and see what outcomes and improvements can be achieved. This creates a common goal of where the opportunities are to improve the fire 'business' and is the first

step before making the effort to spread the word across the community. None of this is easy but it is the first critical step to success.

4.2.   Get the "whole" system in the room

A sense of community is essential for meaningful collaboration. When people are all present and meet across lines of status, function, hierarchy or the government / private divide, "problems" can be viewed as systemic rather than discrete. For example, one issue we faced was the community centred on a village, complaining bitterly about the lack of prescribed burning in a national park reserve and the threat that this posed. The reserve comprised about 15% of the total timbered area and its nearest boundary was over 10 km from the village. Regular prescribed burns meeting ecological and community protection objectives were regularly implemented in this reserve. The issue was not the discrete problem of burning in reserves, but more the systemic issue that prescribed burning had not been carried out in the surrounding areas of private property. The community did not have the tools to implement this in a planned strategic fashion, nor was it empowered to make decisions that affected it.

By focusing on the systemic issue and having the "whole" system in the room – agency staff, brigade members, residents of the village, surrounding land owners – we have been able to set a new direction and framework for the community. Agency staff are providing valuable advice, expertise and resources to implement broad area prescribed burning that meets community protection and ecological objectives. For years, the community complained that National Parks and Wildlife Service were not meeting their responsibilities. All the agency could do was rebut these claims, feeling that it did not have the authority to comment on other areas. The result was impasse and dissatisfaction by all parties. By getting everyone together in one place we were able to address the systemic problems, which led to more committed and creative outcomes. The work becomes more engaging and secure for all. Political maneuvering falls away and practical on-ground fire management solutions occur.

There are additional benefits to having the whole system present. New patterns of action that are agreed to in the room are often carried outside of it *because* all relevant parties enacted them together. There is less "sell" needed when three or four parties are able to come to the same conclusion at

the same time. This challenges government agency norms of behaviour, where traditional approaches to community interaction follow a tightly controlled, one-way flow of information, guard-decision making power tightly and seeking to constrain interaction between stakeholder groups for fear of inadvertently inflaming issues. This is typified in a recent interview question for a manager's position where applicants were asked, "Given the recent negative publicity on fire management how would you manage public opinion?" The answer is you can not!

Getting the whole system in the room, in our experience, fostered a two-way interactive flow of information. Decision-making occurred through an open, interactive process rather than behind closed doors. Each stakeholder was encouraged to clearly set out their boundaries, beyond which they were unwilling or unable to negotiate. The boundaries established the rules by which interaction took place and consensus decision-making was the order of the day. By having everyone present, we were often able to make decisions on the spot. Coming to consensus forced all members to work harder to craft solutions that spanned the interests of different groups, rather than focusing solely on their own needs.

4.3. Focus on the future

When a group is asked to list the problems they face energy drains away. Early group dynamics research 40 years ago taped a series of planning meetings where they were asked to approach issues in this way. The tapes revealed that people's voices grew more stressed, depressed and negative as problems were listed and prioritised. Enthusiasm drained away and all participants came away feeling that issues were almost insurmountable (Weisbord, 2000). These sort of practices are still in use today. Ask yourself how many meetings and gatherings you have been to where all that was talked about was what was wrong with the situation?

The alternative is to work with people to set down in vivid detail the preferred future they want to see in two, three, or five years. This simple concept has enormous power. While untangling present problems leads to depression, imagining future scenarios energises common values. Taking a stand for a desired future provides guidance for goal setting for the community, planning and skill building.

Post the Goobang fires there was a need to debrief on the events that occurred and publicly acknowledge the community's grief. This inevitably focused on the past and problems that occurred but was an essential step in the process. However, it was vitally important that we did not dwell on these issues and let it determine the future direction for fire management in the Central West. As a community we sought to understand the shortcomings, where problems existed, but we moved beyond this, focusing on where we wanted to improve and head into the future. Looking at the future we wanted to create for fire management helped individuals move beyond feelings of loss and futility. A common comment from debriefs is that "we have all been here before, no one learnt the lessons from last time" and all the old mistakes were allowed to happen again. We focused on this attitude and sought ways to ensure that a positive future direction was set, that we did learn the lessons of experience, rather than be dragged down by them. We had made the decision to stop playing the blame game and start learning from our collective experience.

4.4. Structure tasks that people can do for themselves

We had created an environment where it was possible for the community to action plan, focus on the future and learn for themselves. Rather than allow participants to be passive participants in the process - have others solve their issues and provide them with resources – we created an environment whereby all participants could see a path where they were actively involved in influencing decision-making and contributing resources to the solution.

Rather than allowing the traditional approach of agencies providing solutions to fire management problems, we had created a learning environment. This is an important and subtle distinction. Many authors on conflict resolution and collaborative efforts in natural resource management emphasise the importance of allowing people to make sense of their own experiences and have influence over the environment in which they live.

The agencies kick-started this process by implementing, as a matter of urgency, decisions that were made in early community meetings. Fire trails were upgraded to agreed standard, key prescribed burns were implemented and water supplies were upgraded throughout the landscape. Within two to three months of the meeting being held work was started or completed. This had the

positive effect that previously cynical participants realised that they could have an influence on fire management outcomes and agency staff were not just paying lip service to their concerns.

The community also commonly questioned us on who was going to pay for all this work. We emphasised that resourcing was and always will be an issue. Agencies, brigades, land owners never have enough time or money to do what they wish. Leading agency staff did find some extra resources but the overwhelming message was that if we as a community developed new strategies, then we as a community would be ultimately responsible for implementing them. If we were not prepared to increase our own efforts, skills and commitment then we, as a community should change our expectations together and not complain about not having enough. There has not been one case where a community group has decided to do this.

Building on this theme, we emphasised how we as a community were much more likely to receive scarce resources if we built practical, tenure blind fire management strategies than if we approached it in a fragmented manner. A landscape approach to fire management carries, we believe, considerably more power in seeking limited resources and has much greater effect in implementation.

The community has taken on board responsibility to improve fire management practices across the entire landscape. The best example comes from a brigade captain proposing, planning and implementing a prescribed burn across four different land tenures. To do this he sought advice on environmental planning processes, agreement from National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Lands and Council. The burn area included a water catchment for the town of Parkes and he had to ensure appropriate measures to maintain water quality. Agency staff assisted him in completing the planning documents, advising on appropriate operational procedures, coaching and mentoring him to ensure he had appropriate skills. He acted as Incident Controller on the day and agency crews worked alongside volunteer brigades under his direction. This from a farmer who previously took a parochial and very critical approach to dealing with agencies on fire management issues.

Creating a learning environment and structuring tasks that people can complete for themselves results in an immediate increase in enthusiasm, common sense and goodwill.

5.   THE WAY FORWARD

As fire managers, we must start thinking about the need to construct *majority* positions, rather than waiting for them to emerge from the interplay of groups and public opinion. Values and perceptions of fire management appear to be sharply divergent in terms of the future direction of fire management in NSW. Conservation groups are broadly advocating caution in application fire regimes, whilst farming and rural groups are focused on community protection objectives. Where values are sharply divergent, collaboration between all stakeholders, real and meaningful community consultation and loosening of government agenda setting is the only way forward in constructing solid, effective policy (McGregor, 1999). This type of approach challenges all stakeholders with the fear that they will loose hard won influence over the debate. No one can control the exact outcome of a process such as this, but we believe that the outcomes will ultimately be greater benefit to the entire community.

There are many examples of best practice collaborative community participatory processes that have direct application in solving fire management issues. These include *Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System* (Elton Consulting, 2003), *Strategies and Guidelines for Community Participation* (Cramphorn & Read, 1997), *Making Collaboration Work: Lessons from innovation in natural resource management* (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000) and *Further Defining Community-based Fire Management* (Ganzl et al., 2003). We would encourage the reader to follow-up on these examples.

We also recognise that the demands of collaboration are very high on all participants. Volunteers are expected to attend meetings, have input, improve skills and provide resources for no monetary remuneration. Agency staff find themselves being overwhelmed with the extra demands of organising and facilitating meetings, often with reluctant and difficult participants, while attempting to keep day to day work ticking over Race & Buchy (1989) document many of these difficulties. There are no easy answers to this dilemma. Perhaps the decision comes down to asking will the outcomes be worth the effort? In our case the answer is most definitely "yes".

We have often told the story of the $100 million that was spent on aircraft fire suppression efforts in NSW during the 2002/2003 season. The

community and agency staff is acutely aware of the lack of resources available for on ground works, and yet we spend huge amounts on *reactive* fire fighting. Aircraft are an essential part of modern fire fighting, but imagine for a moment if we instead spent $50 million on proactive, community based fire management strategies. Spread across 50 bushfire management committees in NSW, $1 million annually would allow an unprecedented level of *proactive* strategies to be implemented. We recognise the audacious nature of this proposal, but we pose the question why could governments not do this when these amounts are being spent anyway and they result in better, community based fire management outcomes?

We need new directions in leadership that focus on public involvement and fire management agencies must be the catalyst in this change. The community look to government to play a leading role in fire management meeting community protection objectives and ecological objectives on both private and public lands. Staying effective as agencies will mean having staff who can make public involvement processes work more effectively. Fire management is and will remain grounded in operational realities – pumps, hoses, crews and the reactive putting out of fires –Agencies such as the Rural Fire Service and other rural fire services around the country have built their cultural history around this approach. Similarly, we need continued and improved scientific research into fire behaviour and ecological responses. This will ensure we have the safest systems available for our on the ground fire fighters and continue to maintain the biodiversity of our natural systems. The land management agencies, research cooperatives and CSIRO will continue to take the lead in these areas.

What is only slowly being recognised is that fire in the Australian landscape has a much broader basis than just an operational or scientific basis. Underlying these two contexts, overwhelmingly is the fact that:

Fire is a social issue.

The best way to address the social issues surrounding fire management is to ensure that the entire community has the opportunity to have input into the decision making process. This will take us from a reactive approach we now take into proactive conflict resolution. We need to start educating and skilling our leaders in fire management to this end. Until we do this and move to solving the social issues surrounding fire and fire management, we will continue to have irreconcilable conflict. The only solution is to "seek first to understand, then to be understood".

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