

Wildfire Prevention Planning in the I Zone and Beyond – Are We Making a Difference?

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Abstract

South Australia's Country Fire Service Region One covers over 10,000 square kilometres including Kangaroo Island with a population in excess of 200,000 and responds to 34% of all incidents within the State. State and Local Government Committees and agencies formulate fire prevention plans for the purposes of minimising costs and losses from wildfire and to meet prescribed legislative requirements. Plans are developed to standard guidelines determined by the Fire Service and involve significant resources and energy to put together prior to adoption and implementation. The question is how do you evaluate the effectiveness of autonomous District Bushfire Prevention Committee planning whilst at the same time influence a landscape approach to Bushfire Prevention across the Region? This paper examines the methodology of the District Bushfire Prevention Plan – Audit Tool from a practitioner's perspective with the principle objective of an open audit process to ensure all aspects of fire prevention planning have been considered.

Introduction

The South Australian Country Fire Service, like many other Fire Services, operates in a changing environment where the external functions and community expectations are ever demanding in addition to increased judicial and governance accountabilities.

In South Australia, Local Councils and the Country Fire Service have statutory responsibilities for Bushfire Prevention Planning. Within SACFS Region One there are nine Local Government Authorities each, with their own autonomous District Bushfire Prevention Committee. Each Council employs a Fire Prevention Officer and they are required to prepare and maintain a District Bushfire Prevention Plan that has been developed in consultation with key stakeholders.

The CFS Act/Regulations provides the mechanism for each Council to formulate and implement Bushfire Prevention Committee's and their respective action strategies, whilst the Country Fire Service provides policy, planning leadership, and the provision of training to Council's appointed Fire Prevention Officers. Whilst not specifically referenced in legislation, the CFS also carries an audit responsibility for District and Regional Bushfire Prevention Plans.

Bushfire Prevention Authorities

In South Australia there are three Committees consisting:

- SA Bushfire Prevention Advisory Committee
- Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee's
- District Bushfire Prevention Committee's

The principle focus of this paper is at the District and Regional Bushfire Committee level.

The Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee has legislative responsibilities under the CFS Act/Regulations and systems need to be developed to ensure the Regional Committee properly addresses these responsibilities. Of significance is the need for a strategic landscape approach and to: -

- Provide a forum to progress State/Regional strategies and where representatives of the Committee are able to meet on a regular basis to exchange ideas, issues, information and communicate with other members.
- Assess the extent of fire hazards within the Region and co-ordinate bushfire prevention planning including the formulation of a Regional Bushfire Prevention Plan;
- Make recommendations to the appropriate authorities in relation to the carrying out of works to prevent the outbreak or spread of bushfires in the Region or on land adjacent to the region;
- Consult with other committees in adjacent regions and to co-operate with District Bushfire Prevention Committees in the Region;
- To carry out any other functions assigned to the Committee by Regulation;
- To consider and recommend the fixing or amendment of dates for the Fire Danger Season within the Region.

District Bushfire Prevention Committee's have legislative responsibilities under the CFS Act/Regulations while systems need to be developed to ensure the District Committee properly addresses their responsibilities. Of significance is the need to:

- To assess the extent of fire hazards within the area;
- To advise the appropriate authorities of the existence of fire hazards within its area and make recommendations in relation to their removal;
- To prepare plans for bushfire prevention within its area;
- To consult with other committee's in adjacent areas and to cooperate with any Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee whose Region includes its area;
- To advise the Council, the CFS Board, the advisory committee, the Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee and any other appropriate authority on bushfire prevention in its area;
- To carry out any other function assigned to the committee by Regulation;
- In the preparation of bushfire prevention plans, take into account proper land management principles.

District Bushfire Prevention Plan – Common Features

- The plan identifies hazard, risk and assets under threat from fire;
- The plan produces a series of strategies to achieve fire prevention;
- Fire Prevention Plans for Forestry SA reserves and DEH Reserves are attached as appendices;
- District Bushfire Prevention Committee's are consulted by DEH and Forestry in the process of preparing plans for their reserves.

Team Concept

Bushfire prevention planning is not the sole responsibility of any one entity or individual. In Region One, staff recognise that the combined efforts of the regions nine District Committee's and the Regional Committee is crucial to the success of the efforts for a landscape prevention program. Staff meet Fire Prevention Officers on a bi-monthly basis and every second meeting of the Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee is combined with all Fire Prevention Officers in order to enhance integrative cooperation.

These meeting are held at principle Council premises and elected members and staff together with the chairman of the District Committee are encouraged to attend and actively participate. This assists in the team prioritising and recommending possible interventions to support the Council being visited whilst considering landscape applications and the sharing of experiences, knowledge and relationship building.

The Need For a Consistent Process

Country Fire Service staff have been evaluating District Bushfire Prevention Plans for many years prior to the recent introduction of an "audit tool" in response to an increasing concern regarding an evaluation process that was ad hoc and inconsistent in its application approach. It was identified that there was a better way of affording due process and diligence to each plan that was consistent in every regard. Better yet, make the process crystalline and give it to the District Bushfire Prevention Committee's so they know what the Country Fire Service is looking for. Importantly, any "process" put into place needs to be valid and able to withstand due rigour.

The review of District Bushfire Prevention Plans assists in the evaluation of the adoption of guidelines and recommendations of the Regional Committee. For example:

- Country Fire Service Revegetation Guidelines;
- Government Agencies Fire Liaison Committee's Guide to Fuel Breaks and Access Track Standards;
- Appointment of Authorised Officers for the purposes of issuing permits during the Fire Danger Season;
- Codes of Practice for harvesting use of fireworks, and stubble burning.
- Fire protection standards for licensed waste disposal facilities;
- Forestry Plantation Guidelines (currently under review);
- Reporting templates for May and October reporting to the Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee;
- The application of Australian Standards for risk assessment and management and the consistent application throughout the landscape of prescriptions to mitigate the consequences on like assets and vulnerable communities.
- Roadside signage and opportunities for marketing synergies for a landscape approach so as the population moves throughout the Region they receive the same or like message themes.

Consultation and Implementation

The “Audit tool” concept was circulated to Council Fire Prevention Officers within the Region as they are the resident expert for each District Committee and we needed them to “buy in” into the process so that they have ownership and may influence factors the Country Fire Service was looking for when evaluating District Bushfire Prevention Plans. As with any Change Management process, the Fire Prevention Officers were integral to the success of this proposal and their support and personal encouragement resulted in a simple process document being formulated and championed by key stakeholders. Importantly, the Regional Bushfire Committee supported the initiative as they saw it as an integral component in their statutory obligations to ensure a co-ordinated approach to bushfire prevention planning within the Region and a means of evaluation at the lowest level . The Region’s Local Government Fire Prevention Officers and their respective Committee’s welcomed a process that provides for simple, yet effective evaluation feedback together with an ability to self-audit their respective planning documents without the need to second guess another Agency’s objectives.

The District Bushfire Prevention Plan – Audit Tool has been further promulgated into the remaining five South Australian Country Fire Service Regions and has been endorsed by the Strategic Management Group of the Country Fire Service.

To date four Local Government Authorities in Region One and Two in the South East of the State in Region Five have been “Audited” and despite a hatred of the word “audit”, found the process to be credible and effective as the focus was maintained and distractions minimal.

Basic Approach and Methodology

1. Read the whole plan through (without stopping for critical review) to get an overall understanding of the fire problem and the action plans proposed. This will also give a guide to the general standard of the whole plan
2. Start the review by comparing the format of the District Plan against that recommended in the model plan. Note any variations and when reviewing those sections look for any justification. Where possible, ensure that the standard format is adhered to.
3. Continue by reviewing each section. In doing this, read in conjunction with the model plan and make critical comparisons. Whilst the first sections are descriptive and should provide factual information, the plan overall is an action plan and should provide practical solutions and activities, i.e. what is to be done, when and by whom. And what is to happen if these things are not carried out.
4. Refer to the prompt questions provided in the model. Are they appropriate to this area and have they been answered and the information used in the plan. Some clearly are not.
5. Can a map relay information in a clearer way than text? Check that maps are included are appropriate, clear and useful. Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words.
6. What is the impact or restrictions on the plan of other associated legislation? Eg Native Vegetation Act, Council By-Laws.

7. Has the appropriate consultation process been followed? Check representation and attendance of other agencies and Country Fire Service Brigades at Committee meetings.
8. Check the formulation of action sheets for resolution of outcomes?
9. Check local knowledge of the area with Country Fire Service Brigades and crosscheck against Vulnerable Community Maps (yet to be developed).
10. Review any existing mechanisms for community education and explore opportunities for the establishment of Community information prior to and during a wildfire event.
11. Tour the area with the Fire Prevention Officer (DBPC) to check whether District Bushfire Prevention Committee adequately addresses on ground problems.
12. Review the Committee's response to the occurrences of significant fire events and post fire evaluation of prevention activities;
13. Regional Prevention Officer to meet with Council's Chief Executive Officer and Fire Prevention Officer after the audit to deliver the CFS report and to discuss the DBPC.
14. Prepare written comments to provide to the Fire Prevention Officer.

Challenges

The Regions greatest long-term challenge is to secure commitment from Local Government officials to afford adequate funding to wildfire prevention in direct competition with other community demands with a limited capacity to generate funds due to reduced rate's base.

Bushfire prevention strategies are not immediately tangible and many fail to recognise that they are a long-term investment, which will pay off in years to come.

In areas of the Region, particularly the greater Mount Lofty Ranges, pest plants and woody weeds such as feral olives have invaded the landscape and their programmed removal costs far exceed the value of the property's concerned.

In the plans "Audited" to date, many tended to fall down in the same areas:

- The maps were of poor quality and often did not provide the information they said they were providing.
- Sub plans from other Government land agencies, viz DEH, Forestry SA and SA Water were non-existent.
- Prompts were not answered where they should be eg access would be addressed in the topography section.
- Statements were not measurable.
- No review of treatment strategies was undertaken after a fire event of concern.

- There was no follow through of identified assets under threat eg an asset would be identified as threatened but no action would be described. Standards for Hazard Management would not be described eg “The management committee of the Community hall at Mylor will mow a 20 metre zone around the Community Hall to a height of 10cm during the Fire Danger Season”. This type of information was missing.

Conclusion

The “audit” is a valuable tool for identifying planning deficiencies and focus on planning initiatives in a non-threatening manner. The SA Country Fire Service has gained unified support of the Regional Bushfire Prevention Committee’s and District Bushfire Prevention Committee’s because of a formulated crystalline process which is framed in a simple and effective manner for use at all levels. It is a checklist that is inclusive of all areas from the High Rural / Urban interface areas to remote vulnerable communities.

We acknowledge that the audit process is in its infancy and that it is too early to undertake any detailed trend analysis that could be published. It is, however, becoming increasingly evident that Regional and District Bushfire Prevention Committees, Fire Prevention Officers and Local Government Authorities are welcoming the Country Fire Service’s approach of “doing it with the Community instead of doing it to the Community”.