

LEGISLATION OR COOPERATION? BUSHFIRE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN VICTORIA AND GREECE

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The Project:

This PhD is examining the three key governance structures in Victoria's bushfire management sector: the Victorian State Government, Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victorian 'community' to answer the question 'What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current governance structure regarding bushfire preparedness in Victoria?', and the sub-question '(How) can these be improved?'. As well as examining bushfire governance structures in Victoria, the research will create case studies of fire management in Greece and America. This will help identify the unique aspects of the Victorian approach to bushfire management, and suggest ways to overcome the difficulties in engagement encountered in Victoria. The Greek and Victorian cases are summarised here to show the benefits of considering fire management schemes in other contexts for Victorian planning schemes. The comparison between an entire European country and a single Australian state is justified by Greece's (relatively) small area, and forest fire management being (effectively) the responsibility of the Greek Fire Service, a centralised body that oversees the entire country.

Greece:

• Socio-economic and demographic shifts

- Declining importance of agriculture to national economy since mid-twentieth century;
- Mass rural-urban migration; 35 per cent of total population moved from rural to urban areas between 1940 and 1981.
- Remaining population generally older and of low socio-economic status.
- Economic and time poverty, and old age, diminish ability to engage with fire managers.

History of catastrophic fires:

- E.g. 1998: 120,000-150,000ha burnt, 4+ deaths;
- 2000: 145,000ha burnt, 10 deaths;
- 2007: 270,000ha burnt, 84 deaths;
- 2009: 20,000ha burnt, no deaths.

Increased suppression capacity:

- Among the best protected nations in terms of aerial suppression capacity per hectare;
- Suppression budget more than trebled between 1998 and 2007, while fire prevention budgets decreased;
- Public pressure for government to be seen to be doing something, suppression resources provide compelling media images.

Victoria:

• Socio-economic and demographic shifts

- Declining importance of agriculture to national economy since mid-twentieth century;
- Huge growth in population of regional settlements / urban-rural fringe since mid-twentieth century, with further growth anticipated;
- CFA now serves over half of Victoria's population without a significant growth in volunteer membership;
- Increasing diversity of residents at-risk with new residents typically working away from the community in which they reside.

History of catastrophic fires:

- E.g. 1938-1939: 2,000,000ha burnt, 71 deaths;
- 1983: 418,000ha burnt, 47 deaths;
- 2003: 1,300,000ha burnt, 3 deaths;
- 2009: 450,000ha burnt, 173 deaths.

Increased community engagement efforts:

- Community Fireguard (1993);
- FireReady Victoria (2004/2005);
- Improved qualitative studies of community engagement post-Black Saturday;
- Award-winning use of social media to promote awareness and provide warnings.

Implications:

Civic disengagement with fire management programs appears to be a natural consequence of the declining importance of rural locations as social and economic centres. In both Greece and Victoria socio-economic and demographic shifts have led to significant declines in rural economies, reducing the socio-economic imperative for residents to engage with fire managers. Greek fire managers have sought to mitigate this problem through the procurement of additional suppression capacity, while in Victoria the problem has led to the development of a wealth of educational programs. Both approaches have had some success; Koutsias and colleagues (2012) show a trend of decreasing average fire size across Mediterranean Europe since 1990, which they suggest shows the effectiveness of a suppression-based approach during moderate fire seasons. In Victoria a significant proportion of at-risk residents engage with Victorian fire managers every season, though there remains a significant hard-core, estimated by CFA at around thirty per cent of total at-risk residents, who are unmotivated to engage. In both cases the need to promote community engagement is apparent, though the suggested solutions to the problem are substantially different; recent research in Greece considers the problems of increased fire risk and unengaged residents as consequences of socio-economic, demographic, land-use planning and political developments. In Victoria, however, the focus has been on refining community education programs in the expectation that this will eventually engage the unengaged. Consideration of the factors that underlie unengagement in Victoria may lead to the development of new policies that motivate or, where necessary, compel the adoption of fire-wise behaviours.

End user comment: Mr John Schauble, Manager Policy and Planning, Fire Services Commissioner.

The idea that individuals and communities can effectively be coaxed into preparing for and surviving bushfires is appealing. But it has been significantly challenged since the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The extent to which community bushfire safety policy may in future need to be prescriptive rather than voluntary is an area ripe for investigation.

Further reading:

Background: Glendi Greek Festival Melbourne, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/23851618@N07/6932786089/>
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