

# Report airs concerns over thinning forest fire fighting ranks after US experience

Concerns over the ability of fire fighters to handle large scale fires are highlighted in a major report on the experience of the Australian and New Zealand personnel sent to the US during the height of wildland fire crisis on August and September 2000. The report delivers a series of recommendations for Australian and New Zealand forest fire agencies and for those in North America.

Following the experience, the ANZ agencies debriefed their staff and the report is based on the observations and recommendations made at those debriefing sessions and discussions with individuals involved with the deployment. The report was prepared by Rick Sneeuwjagt, Manager CALMfire, of the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australia.

By the end of the US fire season in late October 2000, nearly 86,000 fires had burned about three million hectares of public and private lands, levelled hundreds of homes and structures, and caused 16 fatalities, including 12 firefighters. The 2000 fire season suppression effort required more firefighters in more places at the same time than at any other time in US history.

In August 2000, 15,000 firefighting personnel drawn from 46 US states and Canada were committed as well as 700 engines (tankers) and 150 aircraft. By that time, the ranks of US firefighters had been severely depleted and had to be supplemented by the US military and eventually from Canada and Mexico.

It was recognised at that time that the greatest need was for what are called Incident Management Teams and the Australasian Fire Control Officers Group was contacted, with a request for support from Australia and New Zealand. After reviewing needs, a task force of 79 experienced staff with incident management and fire line command skills was deployed from Australia and New Zealand on 11 August. This task force completed its assignment on US fires on 15 September. A second task force of 17 aviation and equipment/cache management specialists was deployed for 21 days from 15 August to 5 September.

Throughout their stay, the ANZ task force members were assigned a variety of roles in the incident management teams as well as positions within Area Command. This provided a great opportunity for the ANZ members to directly evaluate the effectiveness of US fire organizations and to suggest improvements that could be made to ANZ fire control systems. At the same time, the ANZ involvement in US fires has provided an opportunity to give US authorities valuable feedback for improving their current fire control arrangements and procedures.

The report says one of several important lessons for ANZ agencies was the US practice of deploying pre-formed Incident Management Teams to fires throughout the country, resulting in effective, cohesive management of large and complex emergencies. Another was the US's national fire qualification system, enabling fire staff to

be accredited for positions in those teams.

ANZ agencies needed a similar system so that qualified personnel could be deployed to fires in or out of their parent agencies' jurisdiction.

"But there is an important alarm signal which, if unheeded, could cripple any Incident Management Team. In the US, as well as Australia and New Zealand, the number of qualified staff who can combat large fires has long been on the decline.

"The workforce is ageing, and the number of people who wish to take part in planned burns and firefighting is dropping. Many ANZ agencies cannot muster sufficient trained staff to fight large fires."

The report points to the need in the US to introduce fire to forests to help restore the forest ecosystems and protect human communities, while in Australia a similar problem exists due to a decline in burning programmes due to economic, environmental and social pressures.

Among the other key recommendations is the desire to develop international agreements and exchange protocols between Australia and New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. The report says these should authorise reciprocal assistance for fire management programmes and large-scale fire emergencies.

Similar agreements should also be developed between Australia and New Zealand (or "ANZ") and between ANZ departments and agencies, the report says. In Australia, a fire coordination centre, similar to that of the US, should be established to coordinate support and deployments in wildlife emergencies nationally and overseas.

The report says an ANZ task force should be established under the Fire Control Officers Group (FCOG). The task force should review forest fire staff numbers and experience levels within fire and land management agencies and recommend steps to ensure that these organizations can manage large fire operations and conduct fire management programmes.

A national fire qualification and accreditation system should be developed to provide for the formal recognition of skills and experiences of ANZ fire staff. Australia and New Zealand should consider adopting the principles and processes of the US Fire Qualification System, the report says. ANZ agencies should consider establishing pre-formed planning and logistics teams for deployment to large incidents. These teams should include understudy and trainee positions to allow inexperienced personnel to gain confidence in key roles, the report says. Various roles and procedures within the Australasian Inter-agency Incident Management System (AIIMS) should be reviewed so that the best practices of the US and Canadian systems can be adopted where appropriate, with special consideration given to the functions and reporting relationships for staff within area command, safety, information and finance sections. The FCOG standards for physical fitness should be adopted by ANZ agencies as a minimum standard for incident management teams and fireline staff.

The report is available at [www.naturebase.net/news](http://www.naturebase.net/news)