

Clear Range Farm
PO THARWA ACT 2620

Phone 02 6235 0158
Fax 02 6235 0002
Email jennyfilmer@ozemail.com.au



17 November 2003

Mr Stuart Ellis AM
COAG Bushfire Inquiry
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
3 – 5 National Circuit
BARTON ACT 2600

Email – coagbushfireinquiry@pmc.gov.au

Dear Sir

**Submission
COAG Bushfire Inquiry**

I would like to submit the attached proposal to the COAG Bushfire Inquiry. The object of the proposal is to address current deficiencies in the operation of Incident Management Teams.

The issues are:

- Utilizing appropriate skills, work areas and technology.
- Excessive work hours for decision makers.
- Transfer, actioning and storage of information.
- Reduction of costs associated with Incident Management Teams.

The Space Wars project is promoting a high level of technology to place incident management cells remotely, skill working as a team, but not physically connected. The title, Space Wars, is recognition that this is a male dominated area with a culture that supports this.

Evidence of the fact that “today’s” best practice is no longer acceptable, and that we have to change rapidly, is demonstrated in records of any fire service or a visit to an operating Incident Management Team.

Utilizing Skills, work area and technology

If you remotely locate cells you can place them where you have the most highly trained people to fill that need. Staff have access to larger and more appropriate work areas and specialist technology that they are use to working with eg GIS programs, printers and plotters.

The physical work space for incident management cells can never be adequate when they are local emergency based as, even though control centers are built with larger staff numbers in emergencies in mind, there is never enough room, overloading air-conditioning units, prosing health problems with sanitation and hygiene standards. Physical areas go from routine staff of eg 4, to an operational staff of eg during January 2003, over 80 for extended periods.

Work Hours

It is recognized that excessive work hours under stressful conditions impair your judgment. Staff continue to work over department directed hours. In the NSW Rural Fire Service the standard is 16 - 18 hours for first day off the incident, with subsequent 12 hours shifts, 5 days on, 1 day off. Overtime payment records detail that this does not happen, leaving the observation that fire services state one thing but practice another. As 12 hour shifts are the normal operating procedure for all Incident Management Teams I am sure this is the same for other States.

One of the reasons given for overrun in work hours is the limited number of skilled people who are able to leave their current work location and travel to emergency declaration areas. If you relocate the emergency declaration cells you immediately address this problem, and would be able to go to 8 or 10 hour shifts as more people would be available eg Section 44 declaration in Snowy River, Planning cell located in Sydney, Logistics section located in Cessnock, Operations and Incident Controller located in Jindabyne.

Data

Transfer, access and storage of data is of vital importance to accountability. Although the ACT Coroner is looking at an extraordinary amount of evidence relating to the January 2003 fires there are many holes which relate to operational decision making. This will not be acceptable to the public and will be highlighted in any subsequent litigation.

Data systems used should not be specialist software, as this by nature restricts its use. Utilization of commonly available programs, in a highly professional manner, is cost effective and allows rapid integration.

Finance

Cost reductions have to result in better utilization of staff, work hours, technology, expertise and a change of mentality.

Every fire service has as it's primary role to protect life. I am putting forward the Space Wars proposal as a suggestion to improve the delivery of services to our community as I believe life includes both physical and mental wellbeing. There is a general recognition that the current standards are no longer acceptable, we have to improve our skills, build on our knowledge and face the tasks ahead with tools that are available to us, which includes an increased use of technology.

Please contact me if you would like further discussion.

Yours faithfully.

Jenny Filmer OAM

SPACE WARS PROJECT
Planning for the Future of Incident Management Teams

Proposal:

Intensive use of electronic data transfer for Incident Management Cells.

Replace paper based information with electronic transfer using dedicated email addresses for each cell.

Identify and utilize skilled staff in key areas.

Identify and utilize physical space areas for best practice of Incident Management Cells

Benefits:

Information tracking – each email is prioritised, time and date stamped. Storage of data is efficient, backed up by off site storage.

Continuity – shift changes would easily identify which emails had been opened and actioned. Minimization of “lost” directives.

Shared information within the Team – information that had a multi use for cells easily shared. (Including Regions and State Operations if required). Each cell would require a dedicated electronic address. eg Yarroplanning@nsw.gov.au.

Utilization of professional skills – Logistics and planning cells would not have to be on site, utilizing staff at remote locations. Communication would be through electronic, video and audio links.

Work hour’s management – a decentralised system would allow larger numbers of trained staff to be accessed, thus reducing the perpetual problem of staff working over their hour allocation.

Reduction of litigation exposure – a high level of expertise is required in today’s litigious society, and having remote planning cells would allow the most experienced personnel to staff them, reducing Corporate risk.

Financial – scaling up and down could be actioned from a Regional office. Travel and overtime costs reduced as staff could work operational duties at remote cells during normal work hours.

Equipment – utilization of standard computer and phone systems reducing set up costs of a large IMT.

Cross agency efficiency – utilizing common and non specialised technology and software packages (eg Microsoft databases, spreadsheets, etc).

Space – ability to provide acceptable working conditions for all IMT cells as remote buildings / office space could be chosen to adequately house the number of personnel needed in that cell.

Requirements:

- IT support at commencement of Section 44 (email set up).
- Computer literate support personnel for each IMT cell. (This is already identified as a necessary requirement for record keeping).
- Computer hardware for each section.
- Training and system develop to meet the needs of the IMT.

Conclusion:

Fire and other emergency management organisations cannot continue to keep operating IMT’s without serious consideration to their future development. Cost and community expectation requires areas where we see deficiencies (information handling, work hours, qualified staff, situational awareness, implementing change) to be addressed.

If you would like to discuss this issue further please contact me.

Jenny Filmer OAM

Contact: jennyfilmer@ozemail.com.au

Phone: 02 6235 0158

Fax: 02 6235 0002

