

# **THE WAY FORWARD FOR AUSTRALIA'S URBAN/RURAL INTERFACE.**

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Since well before white settlement in Australia, our landscape has experienced bush fires of varying intensities. In more recent history during the fifties and sixties, Tasmania has experienced extensive wildland fires, at times producing fire balls leaping great distances.

In the early eighties while I was in Melbourne doing a fire-training course, I spent many hours in the thick of Ash Wednesday, which almost burnt one third of the State with such intensity that it claimed a number of lives.

So to, for major fires in the mid nineties throughout New South Wales which threatened urban areas of Sydney.

Much debate always follows these catastrophic events, but business seems to continue in land management and fire services as it always has or with cut backs once the general public's memory has faded. These debates often focus on major increases to fire services to combat these horrific fires. In some cases fires involving 100foot flames, fanned by 100 Klm winds on a 100 Klm front (for example). In addition to this Global Warming has seen areas which have been traditionally wet, now turned into dry heavily fuelled areas.

Clearly the public purse will never extend to such a utopia style fire service. In fact we often hear that "*no fire service in the world could have stopped that fire*" or "*it looks like a war zone*". That's because it is. There are combatant authorities, command teams, task forces and strike teams. Many improvements should and are often made to fire services, but the real way forward for public safety actually lies in the other side of the equation.

If historically we have been unable to significantly enhance or boost the nations fire services, and continue to need interstate and military support, then we must reduce the intensity and size of the enemy. (The fire).

Strategic and sustainable **HAZARD REDUCTION BURNING**, which is publicly and politically acceptable, must be undertaken on every appropriate day during our off season.

However to sustain this land care management program, it must be done in conjunction with the key stakeholders, in the interest of our nations bio-diversity. CSIRO, Wildlife, Forestry, Environment agencies, local government botanists, fire services, fire unions and any one else who may have a strategic interest in the local flora, fauna and landscape, must be a partner in the process.

This **selective and systematic** program then allows for fire agencies to do battle with six foot of flames coming at them at a greatly diminished capacity, as a direct result of the significant reduction in fuel loads. It also does far less damage to flora and fauna because of its reduced intensity.

The other aspect of the way forward, is what we have to defend when fire threatens the urban areas. To this end we must immediately start to design out the hazards which can be found in most urban /rural interface areas in Australia. This requires a working partnership with developers, councils and the fire services, whereby agreed criteria, is enforceable in town planning guidelines and contained in the council's Bushfire Management Strategy. Local governments must also undertake risk assessments of their urban/rural interface areas, then declare and list their "Bushfire Prone Areas". Once councils declare "Bushfire Prone Areas" the Building Code Of Australia" (BCA) is called up with safer construction features. This process can be greatly assisted by the fire services, with their historic data and local knowledge.

Designing out hazardous features like;

- Long cul-de-sacs
- Poor access and egress
- Long spur mains
- Construction on steep hill sides
- Construction on fire prone aspects of hill sides
- Poor siting of houses on blocks
- Flammable construction materials
- Poor construction features and types
- No fire breaks
- No defensible space/No buffers zones around estates
- No safe zones within estates
- No alternate water supplies
- Above ground power supply
- Density
- Layout

And many more all goes towards being able to save more life and property with reduced risk to the firefighter.

These strategies are also contained in the American “Firewise Communities” program and the Canadian “Fire Smart Program”

What of the current problems which exist in urban/rural interface suburbs?

There would be a natural “step over” effect that comes with the urban sprawl. Therefore the intent is that in five to ten years time the current outer suburbs are protected by the new and better designed peripheral urban areas.

### **Summary**

The way forward lies mostly in these two actions.

1. Hazard Reduction Burning.
2. Safer Town Planning in Bush Fire Prone Areas.

## **PROFILE.**

Mark Gribble is the Senior Vice President of the United Firefighters Union of Australia, Queensland Branch, and President of the Gold Coast Branch. He is working full time for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service as a Station Officer 3 on the Gold Coast and is a career firefighter with over 26 years of service. He also is the National Occupational Health And Safety Coordinator for the United Firefighters Union Of Australia, Queensland Branch. The United Firefighters Union Of Australia represents over 11,000 firefighters from across Australia.

The Queensland Cabinet appointed Mr Gribble to the Emergency Services Advisory Council in 1999, and he is still serving in this capacity. This council provides advise to the Minister, who is responsible for all the emergency services within Queensland, on a range of issues across the portfolio.

In the year 2000, Mr Gribble attended the National Fire Protection Association's "Firewise Communities" comprehensive workshop in Minneapolis. Upon his return he was successful in major reforms within his local community on the Gold Coast in Australia, by including many of the Firewise Communities initiatives, features and design into the Gold Coast City Council Bushfire Management Strategy.

For the past decade, Mr Gribble has represented the nation's firefighters at the International Association Of Firefighter's, "Redmond Symposium On Occupational Health And Safety" in the United States of America and Canada. He has presented many papers within Australia to the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, Institute Of Fire Engineers, Australian Fire Protection Association, and the United Firefighters Union of Australia, on issues of High Rise Firefighting, Health and Wellness Programs, Personal Protective Firefighter Clothing, Safer Town Planning in Firewise Communities and a range of other State and National issues.