

Consequences of bushfire arson: part 1 – physical impact and economic considerations

It is estimated that between 25 and 50 percent of bushfires attended by fire authorities every year in Australia are the result of deliberate lightings (Davies 1997; Weber 1999; Willis 2004). Although the total area burned by deliberate lightings is commonly less than for fires started by lightning (Kapardis, Rawson & Antonopoulos 1983) and, as noted in last month's bulletin, many are not intended to cause harm, the cumulative effect of such firesetting activities is significant for both the community and the environment. Even a small grassfire lit by children as fire play or experimentation, or wanton vandalism by juveniles has the potential to quickly spread and impact on properties, given the right conditions. Many fires in the urban interface are lit within pockets of vegetation in local reserves or parks and other nature strips that are directly accessible from residential neighbourhoods. Although typically small, such fires only have to travel small distances before encountering, and therefore, endangering people or property.

Even in cases where no damage to property or injury is sustained, costs are incurred by the firefighting agency or agencies involved, whether in just attending a call-out or in fire suppression. There is also the ever-present risk of injury or accidents to crews at the fire scene or during travel en route, as well as the inevitable costs associated with administrative duties. In many rural and semi-urban communities, much of this burden is met by volunteer firefighters, their families, and the communities who help fund and support them (either directly through donations/fundraising efforts or indirectly through providing leave of absence to attend fire incidents). Deliberate firesetting during peak bushfire periods, particularly when concurrent with other fire activity, places significant strain on already stretched firefighting resources, increasing the risk that fires will spread and the potential for endangering people and property.

In addition to the destruction of infrastructure, it is likely that forestry plantations, farms and other affected businesses (including ecotourism-related enterprises) will experience a loss of earnings over short- to long-term intervals. While this may be covered by insurance in some cases, it is beyond the economic capacity of many rural enterprises to insure against all potential losses, e.g. fences or pasture. The investigation and prosecution of bushfire arson requires the deployment of specialist police, judiciary and correctional resources – processes that are costly and place additional strain on organisations' financial and personnel resources.

References and further reading

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