



50 years of fire bombing in WA

Aerial prescribed burning - a WA innovation

In November 1965, prescribed burning by aircraft, a Western Australian innovation, provided the world's firefighters and forest managers with a new weapon for controlling the scourge of summer bushfires. Foresters are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the world's first aerial prescribed burn, conducted in the Pingerup forest block between Shannon River and Walpole.

'This was a milestone event in the history of bushfire management' said Lachlan McCaw, the Chairman of the WA Division of the Institute of Foresters. 'Prescribed burning is essential to reduce fuel levels in the forest, thus minimising the risk of large, intense bushfires. Before aerial burning, foresters could not get enough burning done for it to be effective.'

After a successful Pingerup burn, a second trial burn was conducted in coastal country south of Nannup a few weeks later. By the following year the Forests Department was burning 80 000 hectares each year using aircraft and incendiary bombing technology.

Dr McCaw paid tribute to the early research scientists George Peet and Rick Sneeuwjagt who, working at Manjimup, perfected the science of matching bushfire behaviour to weather and fuel conditions.' Along with the invention of a safe incendiary and a bombing machine (in collaboration with the CSIRO), this was the key to the early success of the aerial burning program' Dr McCaw said.

Chairman of the Bushfire Front in WA, Roger Underwood, was the district forester at Pemberton during the pioneering years of aerial burning, and implemented the department's program. Mr Underwood, also a long serving member of the Institute, has recently published a book describing the development of the aerial burning technology and the first operational burns in the karri forest. 'We made some mistakes along the way' Mr Underwood recalls, 'But the great thing was that every mistake led to a lesson learned and a refinement in the technology and burning operations'.

Following the success of the first aerial burns near Shannon River, the technology was later adopted across Australia and in many overseas countries.

'Although today's technology is far superior to the seat-of-the-pants approach we used back in the 1960s, the principles are still the same' said Mr Underwood. 'Bushfires will always start, so the trick is to minimise the damage that they do, and make them easier and safer to control.'

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