

Title: Risk Perception: The firefighters last line of defence

David Clancy, Principal Consultant

AdvDipFirefighting(Mgmt), AdvDipPublic Safety(EmergMgmt), GradDipOHM, MOHS, CPMSIA, RSP (Aust)

Abstract: Firefighting is a potentially dangerous activity that requires the exercise of skilled individual and team judgment to be executed efficiently and safely. Personnel at all levels within the incident management structure are required to identify and act on risks. Accurate risk perception provides the ability to anticipate future behaviour in a wildfire situation and forms a key component of the risk management process. When risks are identified the expectation is that they are managed accordingly. There have been many documented cases where these expectations are either not managed or following investigations, gaps in risk perception are identified as contributing factors. Perception of elements in the environment is considered to be the first action in forming accurate situation awareness. That is not to say that the individual is a poor decision maker, but rather the information available at the time was incomplete or the individual was overloaded leading to errors. Developing accurate risk perception will aid the firefighter and fire manager in gaining a stronger understanding of future fire behaviour and assist the management of risk. The common denominator that is often present in incident investigations is the individual failing to anticipate future fire behaviours or activity. Humans are prone to errors, after all there is a common saying “to err is human”, by gaining an understanding of where these errors may occur and why, will aid in developing strategies and training regimes. This will assist fire departments and firefighters to become more “risk aware” and increase the effectiveness of the risk decision process. The manner in which information is provided also plays a key role in determining the level of anticipation of risk. When briefings are incomplete or the seriousness of the situation is downplayed this can lull personnel into a false sense of security and contribute to a failure to identify the seriousness of the situation. This paper provides practical strategies for firefighters and fire managers to understand and therefore improve the perception of risk in the firefighting environment.

For further information regarding this presentation contact david@humansafety.com.au or see <http://www.iawfonline.org/texas2010/>