

Title: Can you define acceptable risk in wildland firefighting?

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Risk is an ever present challenge faced by fire departments, fire managers and firefighters alike; therefore the question must be asked ‘what is acceptable risk?’ This is not a simple activity as there are many factors that will help or hinder those individuals and groups trying to define what are acceptable when it comes to risks faced in fire management activities. Risk assessment and therefore determining what is the best course of action has many facets and will often be weighed up based on the potential benefits versus the potential costs or losses. Safety in firefighting should be seen as an outcome of good fire management practices. Safety legislation also places obligations on fire agencies to manage risks; history however shows that it is not always possible to provide a safe workplace that is free from risk when it comes to firefighting. Fire agencies are therefore presented with the challenge of ensuring that risks are maintained to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable. This provides a significant dilemma to any fire agency; it is problematic as there is no prescriptive method or consensus on how “acceptable risk” can be defined in the field of firefighting. Indeed it can be argued that it is impractical in many scenarios due to the uniqueness and constantly changing environment. Any attempt to define “acceptable risk” within emergency services must acknowledge the contribution of individual influences on risk perception, available information, conditions on the ground and the firefighting methods being deployed. By understanding the relationships between the firefighters, incident management teams, strategies and actual conditions you should reduce the variability in what is seen as risk and what is not. This paper looks at the issue of acceptable risk and the risk decision process and provides practical solutions to an often difficult topic.

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