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Nicole Middleton has worked in the field of Occupational Health and Safety for 12 years. She has a Bachelor of Applied Science, majoring in Occupational Health and Safety. Her current role oversees the provision of strategic advice and implementation of programs in the health, safety and fitness area within the Land and Fire Management business of the Department of Sustainability & Environment. Prior to this she worked in the health care industry, with responsibilities for the management of OH&S, Return to Work and emergency management planning functions. She successfully implemented Critical Incident Stress Management programs at two health care networks. In her current role she sits on the AFAC OHS Group and PPE committee.

The 1958 Wandilo Forest Fire Tragedy Revisited

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The 1957-58 fire season in South Australia is remembered for the tragic loss of life that occurred in the south-east region of the state on 5 April 1958. Eleven fire fighters found themselves entrapped on a narrow firebreak when a fire burning in a radiata pine plantation suddenly developed extreme fire behaviour characteristics involving mass spotting and active crowning. Eight of the men attempted to run back along the narrow break, but perished as a result of being exposed to intense radiation and direct flame contact. The three remaining men survived with moderate burns. Two sheltered in the cab of one of the three fire trucks that become stuck in the soft sand of the firebreak or broken down; they emerged safely after the intensity of the bushfire had subsided even though their vehicle was well alight. The other man survived by sheltering in a deep sandy wheel rut and covering his face with his coat. The main part of the fire season had been relatively mild though autumn was dry, and one would not have predicted such an extremely serious fire situation to have occurred at that time of year.

This incident occurred at a time when bushfire behaviour research in Australia was still in its infancy and years before methods were available to fire managers to quantitatively assess fire potential. The purpose of this presentation is three-fold: (i) to review the description of the fateful events and environmental conditions associated with the fire as found in the case study report prepared by Alan McArthur and others that was published in 1966; (ii) re-examine the incident in light of new knowledge on fire behaviour in native forests and exotic pine plantations; and (iii) to increase fire fighter safety awareness in general as a result of both remembering and learning from the past.



James (Jim) Gould is Principal Research Scientist for CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, Bushfire Dynamics and Application. Jim has been working with CSIRO for over 30 years. Jim has concentrated his research into fire behaviour and fuel management of various vegetation types throughout Australia. The results of this research has been a revision of grassland fire behaviour models, prescribed burning guidelines for regrowth forest in SE New South Wales fire behaviour model for eucalypt forest and shrublands. He has published a number of scientific papers on fire behaviour science in national and international journals.



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