

INDONESIA FIRES REVISITING, AGAIN (Yet Again!)

Fires Again, Again, Again, ...

Once again the media is full of smoke, children wearing masks, suffering orang-utans, burnt land, people on firefighting trucks and planes and calls for action. The firefighting, trucks and planes, have limitations on their effectiveness (or indeed usefulness) in responding to fires, particularly peat fires. Fighting these fires is not the solution to the problem, it is a gesture at the symptom of smoke blanketing the region from fires in Indonesia.

Episodes of fire and drought are not new in Indonesia, with major events occurring in 1982/83, which was the first Indonesian dry season in which fires created an international profile, then 1987, 1991, 1997/98 and into the 2000s. In 2015 the fires are back again. The El Nino was forecast and recognised early as being potentially among the strongest on record. There is no basis for being surprised. There is no reason for the same firefighting responses to be recycled to the little or no effect they have had over the 32 years since 1983.

Not Unique

A rapid review will identify that fires are a problem in many countries. The United States, Greece, Australia, Spain, France, China and Russia have all had repeated severe fire seasons in the period since 1983. The persistence of highly negative and disastrous impacts on people, their assets, the environment and landscapes has its basis in decisions on land and its management in those countries. In Southern California and South-East Australia houses are allowed to be zoned, planned and constructed in landscapes where fire is the agent of change and the vegetation is adapted to fire. The people and their assets are not. In Australia there have been severe fire seasons in 1897, 1912, 1926, 1933, 1939, 1944, 1949, 1951, 1957, 1960, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1994, and throughout the “millennium drought” from 1995 to 2009 that included the deaths of over 170 people on “Black Saturday” in 2009. As with fires in Indonesia these events are not unprecedented, can be foreseen and are within repeated recent memory. The fire management ‘system’ remains in need of continuous improvement. Indonesia is not alone.

We Know the Causes. We know the Solutions.

The Asian Development Bank Planning for Fire Prevention and Drought Management Project in Indonesia assessed the extent of the economic damage caused by the uncontrolled fires and drought in 1997/98¹. That major study of over 130 pages, was prepared by Indonesian and international experts in all the aspects of fire management. The report provided:

- A summary of the Causes, Effects, Extent and Costs of the 1997/98 Fires and Drought;
- Policy recommendations for improved land use planning and management, which underpinned the Investment Strategies proposed and complied with Government Decrees and regulations;
- An Investment Strategy for Fire Prevention and Drought Management of five strategic directions for: fire prevention; fire suppression; early warning systems; institutional capacity

¹ April 1999 Final Report Planning for Fire Prevention and Drought Management Project Asian Development Bank TA 2999-INO July 1998 - March 1999, Jakarta

and capability development; and resource management in relation to fire and biodiversity;
and

- Economic analysis of the investment strategy and policy reforms.

This comprehensive analysis and set of recommendations remains valid in 2015. Hundreds of reports, research and analyses on fires in Indonesia have been prepared and materials from fire related projects implemented since 1983 have been prepared and added. Among them are the in-depth ADB technical assistance, long term project support from development partners, notably GIZ, technical speciality input from the Japanese through JICA, research efforts by CIFOR, the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), universities around the world and reports from projects implemented by international organisations, such as IUCN, WWF and NGOs. This wide range of materials provides identification of the causes and the underlying causes. The material sets out the sensible and rational options for solution to the recurring fire problem and the smoke that it generates, which has impacts on transport, health and the environment. Very large amounts of funding, technical and scientific effort and public profile have been applied to the issue of Indonesian fires.

Now the Indonesian fires are with us again. Basically this has all happened before, very smart people have done very cogent analysis and identified the causes of the fires in Indonesia. Yet the fires are “unexpected”. Why?

This is not a shortcoming of firefighting but of land management. The smoke is the product of land use change, preparing land and disposing of unwanted vegetation by burning it. The management of land conversion is where the solution sits. However that is a difficult and complex mix of factors that includes local to national to international beneficiaries. Those who benefit have no reason to stop or reduce the use of fire in land clearing. The impacts, the costs and losses generated by fire and smoke are not paid by the beneficiaries. The regulations, laws and rules that exist are not consistently enforced or adhered to. No downside for fire users². The solution is to manage land use change; either not have it at all or to allow it but without fire being used. This must involve addressing land management – land allocation, land use, permitting, regulations and enforcement. This has all been said before.

Efforts to address fires and management of natural and human assets are difficult. At the same time the efforts to address concerns to do with the protection of a species or habitat are also difficult. Add in the use of fire in agriculture and other livelihoods and the situation becomes even more complex. This complexity is deepened by the roles, and the responsibilities and interactions that local, provincial and national institutions share. In most fire seasons, there is an uneasy relationship between land use change, land management laws, business scale investment and political processes that goes unnoticed because the fires in those years do not produce lots of smoke. The failure to fully address the needs for fire management becomes internationally obvious only every five years or so due to smoke, not annually. So the stimulus to respond is only strong in those smoke filled years and motivation wanes in other ‘normal’ years.

Fire Management has five facets and only one of them is firefighting:

1. Research - analysis of the fire problem
2. Risk reduction - prevention
3. Readiness - preparedness to fight fires
4. Response - firefighting operations

² Benefits in terms of employment, and income during land preparation and oil palm planting produce financial flows to individuals and groups of people. As a starting point the alternative, that leads to oil palm being established without fire use, has to generate the same or a better financial flows to those individuals.

5. Recovery post fire

Risk Reduction, or fire prevention, is considered by virtually all fire managers, agencies and researchers to be far more worthy of significant investment and fundamental consideration than the dramatically obvious and highly visible firefighting.

Firefighting is necessary, some fires will always occur and the capacity to contain them is needed. Being highly visible it is relatively easy to obtain support for it from civil society, politicians and agencies.

Risk Reduction through prevention is, by contrast, on the whole, dull, boring, repetitive, irritates many interest groups, is likely to add costs to land management³ and is not very photogenic. It also requires appropriate legislation, regulation and policy settings; things that are time consuming, can be difficult to get right and subject to politics. It should be noted that there are laws and regulations in Indonesia directed at fires and land use⁴. Additionally effective prevention centres on awareness, change of practice and consistency in implementation. Implementation continues even when the risk of a fire seems low. Undertaking five years of preventative tasks in a compressed time when fires appear likely (or have started) is not a viable strategy. This approach will fail if it requires raising awareness, changing practice, community support and the commitment of companies and government to be initiated and undertaken in a hurry.

The 'problem' is that the cause is land use change, the fires and smoke from Indonesia is a 'symptom' of land conversion. The underlying causes of fires, which see periodic recurrence of smoke spreading across South East Asia from Indonesia, would seem to include the apparent reluctance or inability of politicians, businesses, agencies, interest groups and civil society, to develop a clear set of information upon which to develop objectives, and to work consistently on solutions of varying scales and timeframes. Until these stakeholders are prepared to engage with the problem, we will continue to respond to the symptoms and provide dramatic smoke filled media headlines with regular monotony.

3 A cost analysis carried out by Project FireFight South East Asia in 2002 showed that it is economical to use no-fire land clearing methods if the amount of vegetation to be removed is low. Where biomass is high, sound subsidy schemes or a regulatory regime may be needed for companies to implement no fire techniques due to likely additional costs. (Dr. A. Gouyon & Dr. D. Simorangkir 2002 The Economics of Fire Use in Agriculture and Forestry: A preliminary Review for Indonesia. PFFSEA - a project of IUCN and WWF).

4 The Indonesian government has issued numerous laws, regulations, decrees, guidelines, and directives on the management of forest and land fires. At the same time, a cross and multi-sectoral organisational and institutional structure for forest and land fire management at different levels has been developed. These legal, regulatory and institutional approaches have been ineffective for various reasons. (Dr. Dicky Simorangkir & Sumantri 2002. A Review of Legal, Regulatory and Institutional Aspects of Forest and Land Fires in Indonesia. PFFSEA - a project of IUCN and WWF)

About the author:

Dr Peter Moore of MWH Global has over 30 years of operational, management and policy experience in natural resources with an emphasis in fire management, system development, policy formation and implementation, national MRV systems, forest and land management including advice, evaluation and technical assistance to government agencies and the private sector in Cambodia, Canada, China, Greece, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, Tanzania, Thailand, United States, Vietnam, and Australia. He was coordinator of Project FireFight South East Asia funded by the EC and implemented by IUCN and WWF 1999-2003 based in Indonesia. Peter is the Service Line Leader - Sustainability & Environment: Food Security, Carbon and Multi-Lateral Aid, for MWH Global, which is a networked, knowledge based organisation with nearly 8,000 staff in 35 countries providing services, drawing on its global leadership in infrastructure engineering, energy, water management, environmental sciences and natural resources.

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