Be a Change Agent and Change the Strategy

Jerry Williams[1]

I was invited to speak at this conference on the subject of disasters and the relative importance of wildfires because of the breadth of my experience. The fact that I currently manage a flight school gives me an outside perspective of wildland fire and fuels management.

I have spent a fair amount of time in wildland fire and disaster management. This experience has been in the management of incidents, and in training others to manage incidents. My experience includes wildfires (I quit counting at 600), floods, blizzards, hurricanes, tornados, volcanoes, earthquakes and disease epidemics. I was even on a cruise ship that sank, and my wife and I ended up managing the triage and recovery center.

Disasters have been around since man was there for the event. By UN definition, a disaster is "A natural or human-caused event, which causes negative impacts on people, goods, services and/or the environment, exceeding the affected community's capability to respond."

Over time, events that would not have been disasters, or even emergencies, are now major catastrophes. The increase in world population, the movement of this population to vulnerable areas, has created a situation where 100's of thousands of people die, and 100's of billions of dollars are incurred in response, relief and reconstruction. This results in an on-going cycle of disasters. Around the world, disasters are a growth industry. At any one time there are as many as 40 major relief efforts by US government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Hundreds of thousands of people on the African continent are dying from AIDS. Millions are dying from civil wars. Millions more are about to die from starvation and disease.

Every year in Bangladesh, 100 thousand children under the age of 5 die from diarrhea. Every day 700 die from malnutrition. I spent 6 weeks in Bangladesh at a research hospital working on a training program for NGO's on the prevention and treatment of diarrheal disease in disasters.

No one knows for sure how many died from the South Asia Tsunami but the number is probably well over 300 thousand.

The death toll from Katrina is still not known and the damages will be in the billions of U.S. dollars. An impact of Katrina and the Florida hurricanes is that the re-insurers are telling the underwriters to cancel policies on structures built on the beaches and outer banks. Allstate just last week announced the cancellation of more than 22 thousand policies in Massachusetts alone.

There is also a worldwide attitude that "the government will take care of me." An Arizona Daily Star (March 22, 2006) AP article told of a California homeowner who cancelled his earthquake insurance because it was too high, saying that he is going to rely on the government to take care of him.

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[1] Retired from the State of Montana and is currently owner/manager of Sonoran Wings Flight Training Centre, Inc., Tucson, AZ info@sonoran-wings.com

These major events make the news and some stay in the media focus for months or years. A large wildland fire might stay on the radar for a week or two and then disappear. Hurricane Andrew is still referred to, and Katrina and the Tsunami will be in the news for many years to come.

In the world of disasters, wildfires are a passing thing. Since 1871, the death toll from wildfires is less than 3400. There is no count on structures lost, but then, how many have burned off of the same foundation more than once?

Sixty years ago, we suppressed fires to protect the renewable resources that we were managing for the products they produced, and the economies they supported. Foresters were the good guys in the white hats. The Forest Service was described in management books as a great example of management excellence.

We said fire in the forest was bad. The most successful ad campaign in history put our symbol in everyone's brain. All hail Smokey.

Then the situation changed. Foresters were not able to continue the cultural practices the land needed. We learned a great deal about the effects of fire thanks to some great researchers. So now we said fire was natural and good. The drip torch brigades were on the march.

Then a bunch of folks lost their homes from our "prescribed" fires. The system went awry. But since we thought we were still the good guys in the white hats, we said, "Hey, we're from the government and we know what is best." The public has lost trust in the government to do the right thing in a disaster. Another impact of Katrina and the Florida hurricanes is that the American public now has no trust in the ability of their government to respond in disasters. A recent media survey indicated only 15 percent had any confidence at all (AP, Tucson Citizen, March 3, 2006).

Today houses are wrapped in aluminum foil to protect them from the results of our actions, or non-actions, over the years. In my opinion, if people want the experience of living in the woods, they should have an opportunity to get all of the experience. Just as the wilderness hiker has the opportunity to be eaten by a grizzly, maybe the wildland homeowner should have the opportunity to get burned up.

We have fire managers that are afraid to fight fire aggressively. The courts and the agencies have put in "rules of engagement" that make an Incident Commander (IC) think long and hard about taking action. In the old days, if we had two firefighters and a couple of tools, we set an anchor point and started making line. If we were lucky we had some C-rations and maybe a ham and cheese sandwich that the ladies in the office made and sent out. We didn't have TV and foosball and movie set catering services in our fire camps. The idea that a fire boss would wait ten days to establish an anchor point and start building line just baffles me. And you know what, the public knows this too.

Those big air tankers full of money sure do make good clips on the evening news but somebody has to still build line.

There is a well known axiom of management, "If you do things the way you have always done them, you will get the results you have always gotten." If you like sitting in the office doing those Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and all the other stuff you do, don't change a thing. Otherwise, it's time to find a new approach and a new horse to ride. When the insurance companies stopped paying for burned down buildings in Boston and Butte, the urban renewal stopped. When the insurance companies stopped paying for blown down houses in the Caribbean, the people started following the building codes to build new ones. The same thing is happening in Florida and now the Gulf Coast.

In Latin America, the West Indies and the South Pacific, business and government are working together to reduce the risk of disaster by eliminating hazards where possible and really focusing on reducing vulnerability. The best results have been obtained at the individual and community levels.

The Fire Safe Councils and Firewise programs are a good start but they need a bigger stick to wield. A recent article in the Arizona Daily Star (March 5, 2006) about a Firewise effort said "It would be heartbreaking to see one homeowner's effort be overcome by a neighbor who didn't participate in Firewise."

Instead of asking for money for Public Relations programs, ask for positive action. The insurance companies, the banks and lenders, the power companies, all have a financial interest in reducing the losses due to wildfires. They need to support the enforcement of strong codes for location and construction of structures in fire prone areas. After the fires on Mt. Lemmon near Tucson, Arizona, Pima County wrote new codes and guides for construction in wildland areas. The insurance companies are supporting the effort by not paying for reconstruction and not reinsuring structures, or their contents, that do not meet the codes.

These financial institutions also have an interest in good land management using the best cultural practices. You can't lobby congress, but they can, and they do. If every local insurance agent and lender went to company meetings and pushed for corporate action, action will happen. These companies have tremendous political and economic power. I know this from my work with the insurance companies and lenders in the aviation industry.

The world of general aviation, where I am, is changing dramatically. Technology that was only available to the military and airlines is now available in virtually every small airplane. I have a new Cessna 172 trainer coming next week that has the latest in glass cockpit technology. This is the same technology that's in the most sophisticated commercial jets. And, soon to be at an airport near you are the small personal jets.

The Federal Aviation Administration, that large monolithic agency made of stone, has great concern that this technology is overwhelming the average pilot and causing accidents. And they are correct. They could not do their usual approach of writing regulations to make something happen, but the insurance companies could, and have, with minimum qualification training and recertification requirements for insurance coverage.

The FAA has proposed a whole "new" approach to reduce the risk of general aviation accidents. And it is not regulation. We are going to change the way we teach people to fly. The FAA has asked me to develop a whole new course of instruction using a lot of the techniques we learned in the wildland fire training program during the past 30 years. We have already started implementing the use of scenario based training and advanced aviation training devices.

The insurance companies are a key player in this effort with the requirement for pilots to be recertified annually to fly complex aircraft. I have been meeting with the major aviation underwriters this past month and we are beginning to do insurance company recertifications using the same strategies. They reward the pilot and business that have risk reduction programs and increase rates on those that do not. I have had an 18% reduction over the past two years.

The following is a review of my thoughts in the form of some brief statements:

1. We created this situation with our fire suppression success and loss of management options.
2. The traditional PR programs (e.g., Smokey Bear) are not working.
3. A new approach to risk reduction is needed and the government isn't going to be able to make it happen.
4. The public understands the economics and options of high insurance costs and premium breaks.
5. The folks at the local level ultimately have the power to make something happen. The lenders and the insurers have to take action.
6. A change is needed and you have to make it happen.

There are a lot of very creative folks in the wildland fire business. Quite frankly, it's time for you to get off your bureaucratic backsides, become change agents, and get on with it. I'm going home and change the way people learn to fly airplanes. What are you going to change?