From the Stars and Stripes to Down Under
Comparing and contrasting utility vegetation management at home and abroad

By Joe Marshall, Sales Manager
ACRT, Inc., Independent Vegetation Management

In 2010, Joe Marshall, sales manager for ACRT, Inc., traveled to Australia. During his trip, he viewed the country's approach to utility vegetation management (UVM), including equipment, customer care, crew training and more. The following are Marshall's observations on how Australian UVM compares and contrasts from UVM in the United States.

The mention of Australia evokes images of exotic animals, lush vegetation and vast, unpopulated spaces. Manmade marvels like the iconic Sydney Opera House instantly symbolize the only nation in the world that is a self-contained continent. Australia just seems so… *different.*

While the basic elements of UVM programs are the same for both the United States and Australia, noticeable differences exist, caused by the unique vegetation and requirements of each country. Australia's relative isolation has led to the development of slightly different solutions to the same types of vegetation problems we encounter here in the United States.

Equipment development and usage

One of the more interesting things about of Australian utilities is how they've developed unique pieces of equipment that allow them to be much more efficient in the field while dealing with vegetation problems. They tend to come up with their own solutions, because they tackle the same problems we see, just with a slightly different approach.

For example, almost all of their wires are on the side of the road, so they don't have to go onto the property to manage vegetation the way we do here. One of their largest tree companies has developed a large aerial tree pruning truck that doesn't require the use of hydraulic outrigger stabilizers. This reduces the setup/takedown time by 5 or 10 minutes, which doesn't seem like much until you multiply that by the number of crews and the thousands of times they set up each year. They can just pull up to the site, extend the bucket, prune the vegetation, bring it down and go. There's no leveling of the truck or extending the stabilizers involved, but the truck remains stable without them. That's an idea that could work well here in the States.

From consumer education to climate

Australian companies use consumer education programs, such as Right Tree, Right Place. It's used to help property owners to select and place trees to avoid collisions with power lines and buildings. Similarly, utilities in the U.S. educate property owners on different types of trees and plants, how they grow, and how far away from power lines they need to be planted to prevent them from coming into contact with lines as they mature.

One interesting difference in the two programs is that Australia includes warnings on their site about the dangers of outages created by small animals, like the ring-tailed possum, that live in shrubbery and brush growing too close to the lines. Our problems are with squirrels, but we don't include animals in our programs.

One substantial difference between the two countries is in how they use herbicides in Australia as compared to the U.S. Herbicide usage is appears to be more strictly controlled there than it is here, and as a result herbicides are rarely used to clear around power lines.

There are similarities in climate between the two countries in areas like Victoria and New South Wales, where it's very similar to the American Southwest, particularly what we encounter in southern California. In both areas, brushfires are a serious problem. In the United States, utilities have to do a tremendous amount of work as a result of fire danger in the Southwest. Australia's challenges with brushfires are leading to pending legislation in the state of Victoria to mandate certain vegetation around power lines similar to what we see in California.

Utility ownership

Government oversight and regulation is one area where Australian utilities adopting western ways. Until the 1990s, Australian utilities were almost exclusively state-owned enterprises. Since then, state governments have been in the process of spinning off utility companies into independent, publicly traded companies. These new companies are now in their infancy as profit-making ventures, so they are learning to balance competing interests of property owners, government regulators, and stockholders, in addition to their primary mission of delivering a reliable supply of energy to customers.

Victoria began the first stage of its program in privatizing distribution and generation utilities back in 1994 to mixed reviews from the stock markets. This was an area of business operations that Australian utilities hadn't previously had to work with as government-owned entities.

Weighing in on work crews

The most notable difference between the two countries' approach to UVM is in their work crews. In Australia, the crews are considered skilled labor and are paid accordingly as a professional trade. That's not always the case in the United States, where in many places it's considered unskilled labor and there's a much higher turnover of people in the pruning crews.

Each country's approach to vegetation management around power lines that are still energized also differs. Despite their status as skilled labor, Australian crews are not permitted to work near lines that are energized. Here in the U.S., for the most part, our tree crews are trained to work around energized lines. There are certifications necessary to safely prune vegetation close to these lines, but it is done by the regular crews.

In Australia, depending on the situation, there are two options to choose from: either the line clearance workers call out specially trained linemen to prune vegetation near the lines, or the crews shut down the power to work around those lines to prune. The lines have to be taken completely offline until the work is done. Here, crews routinely prune vegetation from around energized lines.

Although Australian vegetation management may be different than practices here in the U.S., it's all the same in the end: assessing and evaluating vegetation is important in both countries to maintain maximum efficiency and results.