

Fluffy demolition complexity surely beyond any schedule

The Canberra Times August 31, 2015 [Kirsten Lawson](#)

On the wall of the Asbestos Taskforce offices in London Circuit is a spaghetti junction diagram that brings home the nightmarish complexity of the demolition schedule of Canberra's 1022 Fluffy homes, as authorities juggle competing demands on a dangerous project ripe for error.

It was a brave decision to share the schedule this week and it will be astonishing beyond all we know about bureaucracy-led super-projects if the roll-out resembles the schedule to any significant degree.

Consider the pilot demolitions of five houses, none of them double-brick, four single storey, and all free-standing. These were to be done, we were told initially, in January. Then March. Then late May. In mid-June work was to start that week. In the event, it was three more weeks before the first house, in Wanniasa, was demolished on July 6, and the rest of July before the other four were finally down. Delays of that kind, caused partly by rain but also by the sheer novelty and complexity of the project, would leave the master schedule in tatters from the start.

The taskforce, though, says the schedule is "indicative only" and this is the caveat to hold on to. The taskforce is to be commended for its openness. It is rare a government program is implemented with all cards on the table in the way the Fluffy buyback and demolition has been.

But by releasing a schedule at all, the government opens itself to one of the big dangers – that as it faces pressure to meet the timetable and criticism about delays, the schedule will begin to drive the program. Safety must stay at the forefront, rather than haste and cost pressure – and worker safety is perhaps the biggest concern at all in the mass demolition, when you consider that the taskforce is contracting multiple companies, many from interstate. Few will have experience of Mr Fluffy loose asbestos, and the young men they employ will be the ones on the frontline of this deadly product.

Asbestos Taskforce head Andrew Kefford says the schedule was released so demolition companies can make decisions about bringing people and equipment to Canberra and homeowners can make plans about their future. It took much deliberation, he says, pointing out that some properties are in disrepair, others are partially renovated, 25 are heritage, 33 have shared walls with neighbours or are part of unit complexes. More than 700 owners want the option of buying back their land. His team factored in the demolition of homes in clusters, so [tenders can be let to companies in groups of 25 to 30](#) and costs and disruption are minimised, plus the need to bring homes in bushfire-prone areas down more quickly so they're not left empty over the bushfire season, and the need to get houses back to people who want to rebuild as quickly as possible.

Which sounds like they're effectively prioritising every house and would be excused for retiring to the attack with an A2 mask and a headache.

But Kefford says the deep consideration had resulted with a program that has a "logic" and a "flow", a schedule that is "ambitious but reasonable".

The pilot took longer than expected precisely because authorities were taking care to get it right, he says, homework that gives him more confidence still in the demolition schedule.

The schedule covers two-thirds of the houses. This year, just 45 are on the list, an indication, perhaps, of the difficulties getting the mass demolition underway. The biggest number in 2017, when 316 houses are scheduled for demolition, almost half of them in Woden-Weston areas, and another 96 in Belconnen. That's six houses a week every week of the year, each house expected to create 17 truckloads of rubble destined for West Belconnen. Get used to the sight.