

FIRE NOTE

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PROMOTING COMMUNITY BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS

SUMMARY

This *Fire Note* reports on the Tasmania Fire Service's three-year Community Development Pilot (2009 – 2012), and how the pilot's findings have facilitated the wider adoption and implementation of community engagement principles into broader Tasmania Fire Service community education programs. An action research project was developed to build on the earlier findings of the Bushfire CRC *Effective Risk Communication* project. This research identified that even though people in susceptible areas acknowledged their risk, a prominent reason for generally low levels of household bushfire preparedness was the failure of traditional information-based risk communication strategies to accommodate social influences on residents' risk perceptions, including how people's risk management decisions are developed and enacted. This finding identified a need to base bushfire risk communication and public education programs on principles of community engagement and empowerment. This *Fire Note* outlines the process adopted and its implications for risk communication.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is an update on the *Effective risk communication* project, part of the first phase of the Bushfire CRC (2003-2010).

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▲ Tasmania Fire Service personnel conducting a bushfire ready property assessment with residents at a property in Snug as part of the Community Development Pilot. *Photo: Peter Middleton*

CONTEXT

Despite the resources devoted to bushfire public education, people living in communities at risk of bushfire continue to demonstrate reluctance to adopting bushfire preparedness measures when these measures are communicated through passive, information-based media. Analysis of why passive approaches are ineffective identified the need for a risk communication process based on community engagement principles to empower a community-based approach to risk communication.

BACKGROUND

Traditional, top-down approaches to risk communication were based on the assumption that providing people with information regarding hazard risk and

protective measures will automatically lead to them adopting these measures. While such approaches can increase people's awareness of their bushfire risk, risk communication research has consistently found that just providing the public with hazard and risk information (irrespective of the objective quality of that information) does not automatically lead to increased preparedness.

Previous Bushfire CRC research identified how certain community characteristics (e.g. attachment to place, attachment to people) and competencies (e.g. collective problem solving) could account for differences in people's bushfire preparedness. Recognition that these characteristics and competencies derived from experiences accumulated in everyday community contexts and activities identified how integrating risk management and community development

END USER STATEMENT

The benefits for the Tasmania Fire Service in partnering with the University of Tasmania has been to ensure that our work in the community engagement space is evidence-based and having an impact with Tasmanian communities in community bushfire preparedness.

The action research approach taken has allowed the research outcomes to meet the needs of the local communities, as well as TFS. Outcomes were fed back into the program as it evolved, ensuring that community based approaches continued to be enhanced. The practical recommendations provided by concurrent research will be invaluable for TFS to progress the community engagement approach into the future.

The key to our work in community engagement is recognising that there is no 'one size fits all' approach, and that every community is unique and different.

– Peter Middleton, Community Development Officer, TFS

processes could represent a practical approach for promoting bushfire preparedness. To test this, and to develop and evaluate a risk communication process based on community engagement principles, the Bushfire CRC supported work undertaken between University of Tasmania researchers and the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS). This work developed and trialled a community development approach to risk communication, focusing on ensuring that residents become active participants in increasing their bushfire preparedness.

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

The Community Development Pilot (February 2009 – August 2012) was a bottom-up approach to bushfire prevention and preparedness, using community engagement principles to collaborate with community members, with the aim of developing a flexible and sustainable model of community bushfire preparedness. The program was funded by the federal Attorney-General's Department through the Natural Disaster Resilience Program, and supported by the Bushfire CRC.

The pilot sought to identify how to mobilise and/or develop community resources to empower and support community members to take collective responsibility for their risk management. This was achieved through collaboration between TFS and University of Tasmania researchers Professor Douglas Paton and Dr Mai Frandsen, who applied an action research approach to develop and progressively evaluate the pilot program.



▲ Risk communication research has consistently found that providing the public with hazard and risk information does not automatically lead to increased preparedness.

The pilot was trialled in four target communities in Tasmania – Bagdad, Binalong Bay, Fern Tree and Snug. These communities were identified by TFS as facing comparable bushfire risk and representing the diverse geographic and demographic characteristics of Tasmania. The pilot produced several key outcomes:

- **Community Engagement Volunteers**, a formalised volunteer fire brigade

role, focusing on engaging with the community, acting as a liaison person between the brigade and the community, and providing resources and specialised information when required.

- **Community Forum template**, giving general bushfire information and updates, government landholders' responsibilities and roles, and

a question & answer panel to allow residents to seek more specific advice and resources from agency representatives. This was shown to empower residents to take responsibility for their own preparedness.

- **Field Day template**, showing information on collective community/ neighbourhood property assessment days, providing specific information and practical advice and allowing the opportunity to meet and network with neighbours, share advice, stories, and resources. This can build foundations for greater community connectedness and resilience.
- **Bushfire Ready Neighbourhood Groups**, which are local community driven groups focused on discussing and implementing bushfire prevention, preparedness and response regimes. These groups provide a model for sustained community bushfire preparedness.

By engaging with and empowering local risk management initiatives, the pilot demonstrated a cost-effective approach to promoting bushfire preparedness by providing localised and sustainable strategies for bushfire risk mitigation and community preparedness. Critically, due to the increased networking and sense of community facilitated through the engagement approach, brigade capacity across the targeted communities has increased. The adoption of a community engagement approach by TFS and its volunteers will assist in ensuring that community bushfire preparedness will be sustainable and become imbedded in the culture of the community, and thus result in more resilient communities.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Community Bushfire Preparedness Trial – September 2012 to March 2014

Following the success of the Community Development pilot, an extension program, the Bushfire Ready Neighbourhoods program, commenced in September 2012. This program was established following feedback from TFS managers and district staff of the concluding pilot. Feedback included opinion of the pilot findings and outcomes, as well as advice on the future direction and potential communities for the extension program. Evaluation of the pilot and the associated PhD research project findings suggested that communities that already had some level of connectedness and sense of community are more likely to engage with and benefit from a community engagement approach to promoting bushfire preparedness. These two



▲ TFS personnel and community members discussing the Community Development Pilot at the Snug Fire Station. Photo: Peter Middleton



▲ A key component of both the Community Development Pilot and the Bushfire Ready Neighbourhoods program is community forums, providing general bushfire information, discussing landholders' responsibilities and allowing residents to seek more specific advice and resources. Photo: Peter Middleton

features underpin the new direction for the Bushfire Ready Neighbourhoods program.

One of the recommendations from the pilot evaluation was that neighbouring communities should be encouraged to participate in communal bushfire preparedness activities. As such, larger areas were selected for the Bushfire Ready Neighbourhoods program so that community networking and connectedness could be encouraged between neighbouring communities. This increased resources

and support between residents who, due to geographical proximity, would likely to be threatened by the same bushfire. The new areas chosen were: Collinsvale/Molesworth, Lilydale, and Lorinna/Claude Road. These communities were chosen due to existing community connectedness, volunteer fire brigade engagement and bushfire risk.

The Community Development Officer who worked on the initial pilot continued work on the extension program, developing and managing the community engagement

program. This included engaging other agencies (local councils, Forestry Tasmania, Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania) with interests in the selected communities to facilitate networking and future collaborations.

As highlighted in the Bushfire CRC research section, an important outcome of the pilot was the development of a formalised Community Engagement Volunteer position within the local volunteer brigade structure. Through the extension program, the workshops provide an appropriate and practical way of imparting the research findings to local brigades, who may then put these lessons into practice in their community, benefitting both the community and TFS as a whole. Local volunteers are provided with the skills, resources and confidence to adopt more of an engagement approach, rather than a prescriptive approach, to their role as a volunteer. This serves to promote the community's fire safety through community preparedness. The workshops draw on the findings from the evaluation and research conducted as part of the pilot (for full details see Frandsen, 2012).

Each workshop begins with an introduction about how the community engagement workshops were developed, including a summary of the pilot and Frandsen (2012) doctoral research findings. The importance of community engagement and why it is more effective and sustainable than mere information dissemination is then outlined. The workshop concludes by emphasising that community engagement presents a new era of community resilience, and that the all-hazards approach is now being widely adopted by other emergency management agencies across Australia, as well as internationally.

The workshops also include sessions on demonstrating the difference between just giving people information and involving people in planning and implementation; empowering community members to act on the information by personalising it to their circumstances; emphasising that individual/household



▲ The Bushfire Ready Neighbourhoods program is extending the work already undertaken by TFS and the University of Tasmania to more communities.

REFERENCES /FURTHER READING

Frandsen M, 2012, *Promoting community bushfire preparedness: Bridging the theory – practice divide*, PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/15309/>

Frandsen M, Paton D, Sakariassen K, 2011, *Fostering Community Bushfire Preparedness through Engagement and Empowerment*, 26, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 23-30.

Paton D, Bürgelt P, Prior T, 2008, *Living with Bushfire Risk: Social and environmental influences on preparedness*, 23, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 41-48.

plans should incorporate a backup plan; and discussing ways in which residents can become psychologically prepared for a bushfire.

Other highly successful and community supported templates of the pilot to be carried through to the extension program

are Community Forums and Field Days (see Bushfire CRC Research). Community Forums have been conducted in the three new areas, allowing the Community Development Officer to make contacts with community residents and inviting specific ideas they would like to trial in their area. This allows for context specific and community driven activities.

Likewise, Field Days were organised and held in the communities throughout the 2012-2013 bushfire season. The Community Development Officer is continuing to work with interested residents in establishing Bushfire Ready Neighbourhood groups in these new areas.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the Bushfire Ready Neighbourhood Program continues to develop, consideration should be given to issues that may arise when managing the diversity that will be more evident when applying the program in larger communities and urban/rural interface areas. Future work can also develop the training and organisational needs analysis required to optimise TFS involvement.

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