



FIRE SERVICES  
COMMISSIONER  
VICTORIA

# Review of the community response in recent bushfires

Fire Services Commissioner

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THIS REVIEW WAS SUPPORTED BY

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## Executive summary

In February 2013, the Fire Services Commissioner initiated a review of the community response to the bushfire threat in areas affected by three of the season's more significant fires: Chepstowe, Aberfeldy and Donnybrook Road.

The review featured 120 interviews of residents in the three fire-affected areas and three stakeholder workshops, and was designed to answer three key evaluation questions:

1. *To what extent were activities designed to enhance bushfire safety (as described in the state's Bushfire Safety Policy Framework) in place in fire-affected communities before or during the fire?*
2. *What were the experiences of people in fire-affected communities in preparing for, and responding to, the bushfire threat?*
3. *How effective were the bushfire safety activities in helping people in fire-affected communities respond to the fire threat?*

The key outcome of this review is the identification of seven 'archetypes' i.e. typical 'patterns' in the attitudes and behaviours of people in responding to the fire threat. These archetypes helped to explain the range of experiences of people in responding to the threat of fire, and provide a new lens through which to better understand the effectiveness of the bushfire safety activities.

The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework lists these bushfire safety activities under five priority areas- awareness and education; community capacity building; local community fire planning; fire danger information and warnings; and bushfire safety options – and describes how they contribute to informed and prepared households that are ready to respond if threatened by fire, and ultimately do respond safely during an emergency.

The assessment of the effectiveness of bushfire safety activities in the three fire-affected communities suggests there is significant scope for improving community fire safety outcomes by better implementation of bushfire safety activities.

The key findings of the review are listed below.

## Summary of key findings

The key findings of this review are:

1. The three fires that are the subject of this review each had characteristics that made the circumstances of the fire unique. Despite this, analysis of the interviews revealed typical patterns in the way people understood and responded to the fire threat across all three fires.
2. These typical patterns resulted in the identification of seven 'archetypes' i.e. typical 'patterns' in the attitudes and behaviours of people responding to the fire threat. In short, the seven archetypes are:
  - a. Can do defenders – action orientated and self sufficient, with the confidence and determination to protect property and deal with the fire
  - b. Considered defenders – strongly committed to staying to protect their property having recognised the risks and made deliberate efforts to prepare for the threat of fire

- c. Livelihood defenders – committed to staying to protect their property, stock and other assets from the threat of fire if possible given the likely conditions
  - d. Threat monitors – do not intend to remain at their property if the threat becomes serious, but do not want to leave until they feel it is necessary
  - e. Threat avoiders – conscious of the fire threat and feel vulnerable; plan to leave before there is any real threat
  - f. Unaware reactors – do not believe they live in a fire risk area, either because they are unaware of the risk, or because there is no reason to be concerned
  - g. Isolated & vulnerable - highly vulnerable because of their physical or social isolation, and other factors that may limit their ability to respond safely.
3. Agency strategies for helping communities respond to the bushfire threat were only partially effective.
- a. Awareness and education: There are a range of awareness and education activities but uptake is poor. This does not mean people are prepared. In fact most interviewees did not have homes that could be defended in a major fire, and few had comprehensive plans for responding to the fire threat. An understanding of archetypes helps here – generally it is the considered defenders who are most likely to seek out information and advice.
  - b. Community capacity building: There were very few agency-sponsored community capacity building initiatives in place in fire-affected areas (with one noticeable exception – the Coongulla brigade’s strong involvement in its local community). Despite the dearth of agency initiatives, there were many examples of people relying on family, friends and others in their networks for information and resources.
  - c. Local community fire planning: It is broadly agreed that fire management planning is mostly about coordinating the responses of agencies to the fire risk, with very little community engagement. However, while virtually none of the interviewees had participated in any form of municipal planning process, many had concerns and ideas about fire safety relevant to their local community. It is important that agencies find a mechanism for engaging with communities in order to understand how they are actually likely to respond in a major fire. In all three fires, people behaved in ways that surprised agencies, or ran counter to agency plans.
  - d. Fire danger information and warnings: People are active participants in the warning process (receiving, interpreting and passing on information to others). In fact, most people became aware of the fire threat through their networks or from direct observation. In general, people wanted specific information about the nature of the threat to them and the action they could take to protect themselves – information they didn’t always get.
  - e. Bushfire safety options: No one showed any inclination to ‘leave early’ in these localities raising questions about the application of this advice, how it is communicated and the willingness of people to adopt this safety option. In the three fire-affected localities, there were no evacuation plans ready to be actioned, no community refuges, and only one Neighbourhood Safer Place which was not used. Properties were generally unprepared or underprepared for the fire threat. Ultimately, the available safety options, and the ways people responded, were not significantly different to that before 2009.

4. The Bushfire Safety Policy Framework has an explicit logic of how actions are intended to achieve the desired outcomes but the review highlights there is scope for improving the capacity of agencies and communities to achieve the objectives of the framework through the more effective implementation of bushfire safety activities.
  - a. Rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, awareness and education activities and even warning information may be more effective if tailored to the motivations of different archetypes. The starting point is to be much more explicit about what 'informed and prepared' means for each archetype, and to help people appreciate the gap between being prepared and their current situation.
  - b. An understanding of how people actually use warning information suggests a number of opportunities for improvement:
    - i. Agencies can make more use of local networks in passing on information e.g. by despatching community liaison officers to places where people congregate, or equipping fire crews to provide accurate information to the people they come across.
    - ii. Telephone alerting should be used more extensively to communicate important information (i.e. not limited to emergency warnings).
    - iii. Simple changes to the form and content of warning information can make it more specific and therefore more helpful to people in understanding how they are directly affected e.g. use of maps in warnings, and using location names in warning headers.
    - iv. The capabilities of information units should be strengthened (e.g. through training) to help them appropriately tailor and simplify warning information.
  - c. Given the lack of bushfire safety options, agencies need to better understand where people are likely to gather or shelter in the event of a fire, and consider these locations in their planning.
  - d. A new form of collaborative local action is required that capitalises on the expertise and resources that agencies bring to planning for bushfire response, but also enables communities to deal with local issues in a process that builds community capacity for managing bushfire risks.