
The Fire Knowledge Network

Discussion Paper – May 2006

Purpose

The Bushfire CRC's new Fire Knowledge Network is potentially one of the most important innovations in the fire industry in the last 20 years. The Network aims to assist everyone who has an interest in or responsibility for improved fire management and community self reliance, as well as making the most of both the latest research and the lessons of the past.

The network will bridge the gap between researchers who have the latest research and technology and those people 'on the ground' who need to know and understand how to use it. It will work towards linking 'research to practice' through information exchange, workshops, forums, websites, publications and online databases.

The effectiveness and impact of the network will depend heavily on the level of value that is created for end users. To ensure this, the Bushfire CRC is currently consulting with stakeholders to address the following questions and to ensure the network meets the needs of the fire management community –

- **What are the key drivers in improving the performance of your organisation?**
- **What knowledge do your people need?**
- **What are the key sources of information for your organisation?**
- **How does your organisation use this information?**
- **How can the Bushfire CRC help your organisation with useful information?**
- **What kinds of information resources and products could be used by your organisation?**

Background

The Fire Knowledge Network will allow for more effective utilisation of new and existing knowledge related fire management and the interaction with the community. In addition to transferring information, it is envisaged that **the network** will also have the capacity to synthesize information and produce issues-based summaries and compendia that will be useful to users.

The Bushfire CRC is current developing its technology transfer program as part of the CRC's Education Program – this program will help transfer the research outputs from the CRC's research program into outcomes for fire and land management agencies and the communities they serve. The Fire Knowledge Network will be instrumental to this process, but it will also bring together broader fire research and knowledge, in Australia, New Zealand and globally.

In effect, **the Fire Knowledge Network** will build on the experience of the successful networks hosted by organisations such as Greening Australia and Land and Water Australia. Successful Knowledge Networks work because they are inclusive of all participants and they

provide those participants with relevant, accurate and reliable knowledge that is useful in meeting their specific needs..

Information and Knowledge Needs of Target End Users and Secondary Providers

One of the most effective ways to transfer knowledge between providers and users is to use a Knowledge Broker. Some organizations that host Knowledge Networks, including some CRCs, employ Knowledge Brokers. These people have the task of translating knowledge into application and diffusing knowledge to end users – either directly, or indirectly through what might be termed secondary providers (opinion leaders, media, and direct briefings).

Secondary providers are critical elements in a knowledge transfer process as different end user categories receive their knowledge from a range of different 'trusted sources'. These trusted sources, or secondary providers, present knowledge to end users in a way that attracts their attention and in a form and format end users can 'receive' and understand. These people are also often referred to as 'opinion leaders' and 'influencers'.

Secondary providers must be fully informed and kept abreast of current knowledge, information and best practice. They also need to be able to easily fill gaps in their knowledge from a credible, accurate and reliable source.

Working within a Knowledge Network, Knowledge Brokers are able to locate and validate relevant and applicable knowledge in a timely and efficient manner, removing the possibility of misunderstanding and misinformation that could lead to inappropriate or incorrect advice, prescription and actions.

The value-added aspects of a knowledge broker function is based on ensuring that secondary providers and end users have available relevant, accurate and reliable knowledge *that is useful* in meeting their specific needs.

With the resources that have been made available for the development of a Fire Knowledge Network there is an opportunity to develop a Network that adds considerable value through a Referencing function combined with Translation, Presentation and Transmission responsibilities These will be discussed more in face to face briefings.

The BCRC Fire Knowledge Network

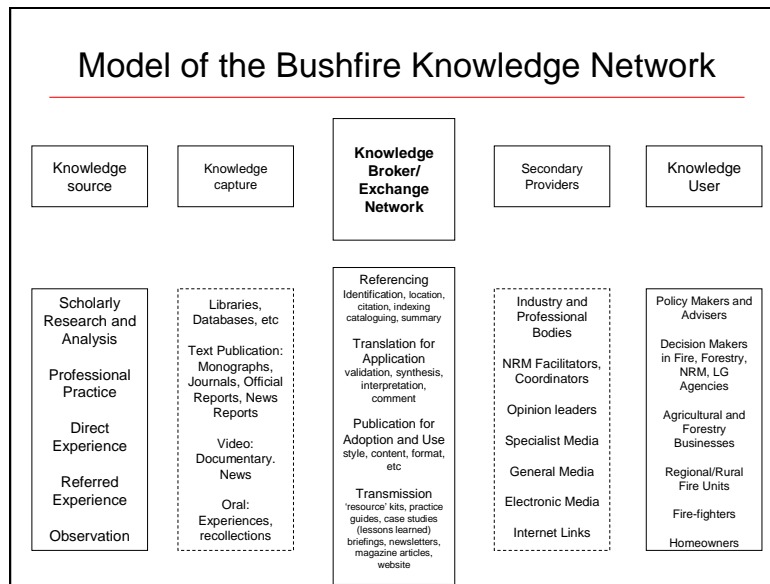
The effectiveness and impact of a Fire Knowledge Network will be largely contingent on the level of value that is created for end users.

The present development plan envisages that the Fire Knowledge Network will address four quite distinct elements in the knowledge transfer process. These are outlined below:

- *Knowledge sources*, including the outputs of scholarly research, documented professional practice, reports of direct experience and observation by third parties.
- *Knowledge users*, including policy makers and advisers, decision makers, businesses, fire units and fighters and home owners. A particular focus of the Fire Knowledge Network is people and organisations (including Rural Fire Units, Local Government and the various 'Care' groups) in rural areas affected by fires.
- Mechanisms for *knowledge capture and storage*, including libraries and databases, text and electronic publications as well as video and audio formats. Knowledge capture facilities and resources classify and codify knowledge in an endeavour to facilitate access and retrieval. The Internet provides a *means* for rapid access to *some* knowledge held in electronic format. The Bushfire CRC is particularly keen to maximise the value of existing partner resources such as libraries and partner websites.

- *Secondary Providers of knowledge*, to end users, including industry and professional bodies, specialised land management facilitators and coordinators, popular commentators (radio, television and print journalists and feature writers), specialist media, and electronic media - including the Internet.

The functions are listed in the following Model of the Bushfire Knowledge Network.



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As can be seen in the above Model of the Bushfire Knowledge Network, the Network and particularly the role of Knowledge Broker, performs a range of functions. These functions are listed in an increasing scale of 'value added' and organisational investment as follows:

Referencing – *Linking information and research*

- involves linking information about various aspects of fire (involving citation, indexing, cataloguing and summary). It would cross reference to libraries among Cooperative Research Centres members and provide an important facility for some user categories and secondary providers.

Translation – *creating meaningful information*

- involves taking raw information, validating and checking its accuracy, and integrating it in a way that provides sense and meaning in practical situations through summaries, interpretation and comment. This is effectively a *Current Information Service*.

Publication – *books, handbooks, brochures, video*

- involves presentation of books, booklets, brochures and videos intended for a general audience. It can also be in the form of electronic posting on the Internet – perhaps on the Fire Knowledge Network Website with links from and to partner websites.

Transmission and Brokerage (outreach) – *Networking, linking and sharing knowledge*

- involves a more specific focus on knowledge transfer to target users and secondary providers. It requires 'Knowledge Brokers' – people with a specific task to actively communicate knowledge to secondary providers and end users. Transmission also has an objective of influencing and changing attitudes, practices and approaches to fire management.

The Bushfire CRC would like to develop a Network that adds considerable value through a Referencing function combined with Translation, Presentation and Transmission responsibilities.

It is envisaged that the Fire Knowledge Network will also involve Knowledge Brokers, hopefully from within partner agencies. The Fire Knowledge Brokers would establish close links with the Fire Service Association and Agencies, the NRM Facilitator and Coordinator Network and rural/regional and locally based organizations that are close to target end users. They would also communicate with other opinion leaders such as the media, as well as seek out opportunities to make presentations at fire and natural resource management meetings, corporate briefings, conferences and seminars.

The Knowledge Brokers would also work closely with others who have specific roles in the Knowledge Network Unit to oversee the preparation of handbooks, manuals and other 'lessons learned' materials that could be useful in meeting the specific needs of users.

Where to from here?

Building up the capacity and capability in a Fire Knowledge Network will take time. However, as a vital first step, the Bushfire CRC is keen to fully understand the information and knowledge needs of target users and secondary providers.

The Bushfire CRC is currently recruiting a Project Manager and Referencing Officer to implement the first stages of the project.

To take the project to the next level, the Bushfire CRC would value your comments on the following questions and will seek to have dialogue with partners through face to face meetings.

Issues for Discussion

- How is new knowledge currently accessed in your organisation?
- What are the priority issues that could be addressed through a fire knowledge network?
- How would your organisation utilise the fire knowledge network in your organisation?
- Which knowledge exchange tools would work in your organisation and why? (websites, handbooks, fact sheets, forums, workshops)?
- What kind of information and learning could your organisation contribute to a fire knowledge network?