

# THE VALUE OF OUR BUSHFIRE CRC

## A STATE EMERGENCY SERVICES PERSPECTIVE

It is well acknowledged that the collaboration between the various agencies before, during and after emergencies is an integral part of the total approach to managing emergencies. The structure and role of the State and Territory Emergency Services has many similarities to those of the urban and rural fire services. While the State Emergency Services are not contributing partners to the Bushfire CRC, much of the research outcomes can be readily interpreted to solve problems similar to those identified by the fire services at the commencement of the CRC.

State Emergency Services, like many of the fire services, provide the bulk of their services through the efforts of volunteers. This model brings with it matters relating to volunteer motivation, recruitment, retention and health and fitness. Also, similar to fire services, SES has an increasing role in prevention. Much of this revolves around strategies to inform and educate communities about suitable behaviour before and during emergencies. SES has adopted the AIMS ICS model for management of incidents. This decision has paved the way for the various fire and emergency services to be able to jointly manage incidents such as fire, cyclone, flood or storm.

Keeping the above in mind, the following areas are currently, or will be, of particular benefit to the State Emergency Services:

**Understanding Communities (C1).** This project is developing a better understanding

of community perceptions and attitudes to bushfires and is incorporating research from other hazards that can be successfully adapted to these communities. This work has led to a community profiling framework to be trialed next year to scope community risk, vulnerability, resources and capacity to deal with bushfires.

**Effective Communication Warnings (C4).** Risk communication is an ongoing difficulty for fire and emergency services. Coroner's reports continue to refer to the need for better, timely warnings and advice on safe action during emergency events. This project is delivering a framework and methodology for identifying community information and risk communication needs before a bushfire emergency. What is being learnt here can be applied to other emergencies

**Evaluating Bushfire Education Programs (C7).** Improving the capability of agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of community safety and education programs is a long awaited advancement within the industry. The output of this project will see the development of a cost-effectiveness model of the impact of community safety interventions on preparedness and associated outcomes. This is sorely needed by all emergency services.

**Safe Behaviour and Decision Making (D2.3)** The research being undertaken by the La Trobe University team aims to increase the understanding of human factors affecting

decision making that could compromise safety on the fireground. Some findings to date indicate that worst case scenarios are being used during decision making on the fireground and that considering worse case scenarios may lead to safer decision making. These findings and future research by this group should be carefully considered by the SES.

**Enhancing Volunteerism (D.3)** Regardless of the emergency service a volunteer gives their time to, there is an impact on families. Research by La Trobe University shows that many volunteers prioritise volunteer brigade work ahead of family responsibilities; that generalised fatigue following operational activities can lead to changes in volunteer behaviour and this may be a source of strain on families not equipped to deal with this. There are however positive experiences for some families who may benefit from an enhanced social network. This project has also made significant findings relating to women as emergency service volunteers.

These topics are a sample of bushfire research projects that SES agencies can now tap into, learn from and adopt as part of their practices.

*Naomi Brown, Chief Executive Officer, Australasian Fire Authorities Council.*

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### RESEARCH POTENTIAL FOR STATE EMERGENCY SERVICES

State Emergency Services are not currently part of the Bushfire CRC but the outcomes of many projects can be readily adopted to meet challenges similar to those already identified by the fire agencies.

Studies on risk communication, community education and awareness, decision making and volunteerism are some examples of relevant research.

