

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT - An Overview

## The Bushfire CRC

was established under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme.

Our objectives can be summarised as providing research which enhances the management of the bushfire risk to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way.

THE AIM OF THE UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT (C1) IS TO INCREASE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO BUSHFIRES.

Interviews with stakeholders, review of internal reports from fire agencies in Australia and initial academic research indicate that building community resilience requires an understanding of how government policy and public perceptions interact and also to understand how the expectations of service providers, communities and agencies agree and differ.

From this a framework will be developed defining community attitudes, needs and expectations which will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of planning and decision-making by bushfire management agencies. The links between policy, planning, community and fire services are presented in the attached model which illustrates the interaction of these elements which are fundamental to our understanding of communities. There is little substantive research on community perceptions and attitudes in relation to risk and bushfires. This project seeks to identify these issues in the community with particular reference to peri-urban communities.

## OBJECTIVES

Identify community needs and expectations for bushfire management and increase understanding of human behaviour before, during and after a bushfire, so that the gap between community expectations and the level of service fire agencies can provide can be narrowed - and so that communities can be more aware of their own needs and how these might be met.

## RESEARCH METHODS

A variety of research methods are used for this Project including qualitative and quantitative research approaches such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, archival material and other documents. Participatory action research may be used to work with brigades in some locations.



How people define their communities varies from place to place and person to person. The issues involved in defining a community are part of the ongoing research. Initial parameters for the Understanding Communities project are being defined by case studies of two peri-urban regions in Queensland. Thuringowa Rural Fire Brigade Group which includes rural, peri-urban and Aboriginal issues and a study at Tamborine Mountain being undertaken by an MSc student. These

studies are an evolving process including the Rural Fire Brigades, community and local government. From these it will become clearer as to how to proceed with developing methodologies for fire services to assess community needs and expectations. When the parameters are more clearly defined this methodology will be applied to other locations in Australia.

Later this year the social issues explored in these community case studies will be combined with social rationalization at

the individual level in work with Douglas Paton in Tasmania (project C4 Effective Risk Communication).

## RESEARCH PROGRESS

Indigenous communities are a special case in the study of peri-urban regions and Understanding Communities have two papers on this topic. Several principles of fire management plans for Indigenous communities are similar to those required for

less remote urban-rural interface areas. A study in Indigenous communities in the Northern Region of Qld has been proposed in collaboration with the Rural Fire Service (N), Qld and Bushfire CRC.

The impact of the COAG review in delivering to bushfire risk communities is discussed in a paper viewed from a Queensland perspective with application to other states.

One page Bulletins of research undertaken by this project and full papers can be found on the Understanding Communities website Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University at [http://www.tesag.jcu.edu.au/CDS/Pages/Bushfire\\_CRC.htm](http://www.tesag.jcu.edu.au/CDS/Pages/Bushfire_CRC.htm).

Information on the Bushfire CRC and all research programs can be found on the Bushfire CRC website.

## KEY ISSUES

\* In most communities, only a small proportion has the capacity to prepare for and react appropriately.

\* Most people rely on fire services to protect them and their property, but the services'

capacity to do this is finite and in major events inadequate.

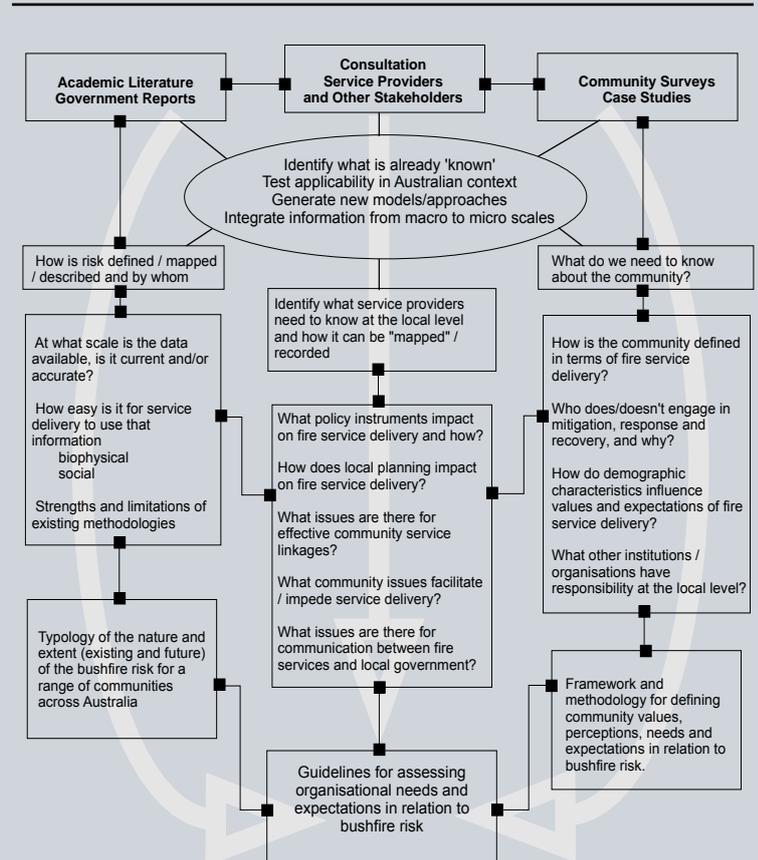
\* There may be a trend towards increasing reliance on the fire services at the same time as the risk may be increasing due to settlement patterns and climate change.

## KEY OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

1. Typology of the nature and extent (existing and future) of the bushfire risk for a range of communities across Australia

This typology will improve the effectiveness of work undertaken by bushfire management agencies by informing planning and decision-making.

2. Framework and methodology for defining community values, attitudes, perceptions, needs and expectations in relation to bushfire risk. The methodology and techniques developed will provide a framework to help improve the effectiveness of work undertaken by bushfire management agencies by providing a means of better understanding the context of community decision-making.



3. Guidelines for assessing organizational needs and expectations in relation to bushfire risk. The methodology and techniques developed will form part of a research framework to help improve the effectiveness of the work undertaken by bushfire management agencies and to increase the self-sufficiency of communities in relation to bushfire risk.

It will do this by providing a means to better understand organisational responsibilities and expectations.

## CURRENT LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

**Bulletin No 1** (2005) Fire risk in Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes in North Australia. Case studies from western Cape York Peninsula. Jim Monaghan. Review by Margaret Spillman.

**Bulletin No 2** (2005) Indigenous Communities, Peri-urbanism and Bushfire Issues in Northern Australia. Margaret Spillman and Alison Cottrell.

**Bulletin No 3** (2005) The COAG natural disasters review: Delivering to bushfire risk communities - a Queensland perspective with application to other states. Alison Cottrell and David Lowe.

Monaghan, J. (2004) Fire risk in Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes in North Australia. Case studies from western Cape York Peninsula. Report for Bushfire CRC, unpublished.

Spillman, M. and Cottrell, A. (2004) Indigenous Communities, Peri-urbanism and Bushfire Issues in Northern Australia. Briefing Paper No 1. Report for Bushfire CRC, unpublished.

Cottrell, A. and Lowe, D. (2005) Policy, planning, practice, politics and the COAG natural disasters review: Delivering to bushfire risk communities - a Queensland perspective. Briefing paper No 3. Report for Bushfire CRC, unpublished.

Cottrell, A. (2005) Communities and Bushfire Hazard in Australia: more questions than answers. Forthcoming.