Bushfire aware planning: preliminary focus group results from four jurisdictions

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This research considers what is and is not possible in addressing bushfire risk as part of urban and regional planning. The research encompasses social, environmental and governance issues and their interaction across planning methods, from strategic planning which sets the planning agenda; statutory planning which creates the structures for practice; and, the interpretation and implementation of these strategies and structures. In four jurisdictions, focus groups were convened bringing together fire authorities, planners and other public officials.

"We find it easier to write lots of rules about how people do things, but we're actually finding it harder to actually get out there with the community to give them the answer – how to manage the land."

Mornington Peninsula Focus Group participant, 14 December 2012

"I think people have too high an expectation that the planning process will deliver a very, very clear and unambiguous outcome, but it's only unambiguous through a very small point in time. It captures the views and the values of the people who have been consulted at that time, which means there's never the perfect solution."

Molonglo Focus Group participant, 16 August 2012

Eurobodalla and Shoalhaven Shires, NSW: neighbouring mountainous coastal jurisdictions, biodiversity rich

Litchfield Shire, NT: peri-urban Darwin, wet and dry seasons, water logged land, spreading African fire weeds

Molonglo, ACT: only two levels of government, bushfire risk on western edge and through the 'bush capital'

Mornington Peninsula, Vic: peri-urban, urban and rural peninsula on Melbourne's periphery

Summary of Preliminary Results:

BIOSOCIAL RISK CONTEXT

The risk was understood as a combined natural-social phenomenon, with topography, ecology and seasons discussed in tandem with h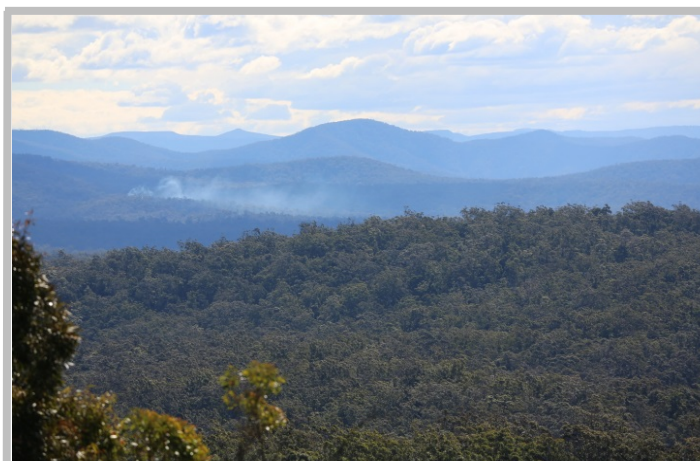uman priorities, behaviours and institutions. Discussion was dominated by the dynamism, complexity and uncertainty of the risk, risk and responsibility, the prevalence of different perceptions of risk, and how this affects the priorities of planners and fire authorities and their engagement with the community.

GOVERNANCE

Legal, regulatory and policy guidance in south east jurisdictions were commended for providing clear direction; whereas in the Northern Territory the clear decision-making authority of prescribed burning practitioners was highlighted. Translating between strategy, legislation and implementation was a difficult task in all jurisdictions, including managing environmental priorities and stakeholder expectations. The compulsory inclusion of bushfire risk in planning in Victoria produced very strong responses about the time/space possibilities and limitations of planning for bushfire risk.

MANAGEMENT

Focus group responses discussed the importance and limitations of hazard protection zones, and their management complexity vis-à-vis biodiversity values and development priorities, as well as the limitations of site specific prescriptions that do not account for broader planning and risk contexts. New mapping and data analysis programs are transforming practice and increasing expectations that future decision-making will be based on better access to information.