

FIRE NOTE

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BUSHFIRE SAFETY FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The goal of this study was to learn about how households with special needs prepared for and met the challenge of a fire event, what special difficulties they faced in doing so, and how community education programs could improve the preparedness of these households in the case of a fire.

BACKGROUND

In December 2005 and January 2006 two major fires occurred in the Grampians region of Victoria. The fires are known as the Deep Lead fire, which started on 31 December 2005, and the Mount Lubra fire, which broke out later in January 2006. Researchers and agencies became aware that the interests of people with special needs had to be addressed and in October and November 2006 an interview study was started, involving nine households that had a member with special needs.

The interview study findings were presented in an Interim Research Report, the results of which were discussed at a workshop with local agencies, where feedback was sought and ideas shared about possible future directions.

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

Nine households were represented in the study. In eight households the views of the disabled person (8) and their carers (5) were sought, and in the ninth household, the interview was with the mother of an intellectually disabled son. A total of 14 people, carers and those with special needs, participated in the study. The conditions creating the special needs included mobility problems, neurological diseases, intellectual disabilities and hearing loss. All household

members had experienced one of the two fires which occurred in the region at that time. The interviewees were aged between 40 and 70 years. Members of three households resided in town and six lived on bush blocks. Half of the latter lived in relatively remote locations kilometres from a sealed road.

The landholdings were smaller than an average productive farm and only one owned livestock. In five households the fire impacted directly on their properties, two of which experienced significant property losses,



▲ Emergency service agencies need to focus more on people with special needs, such as Grampians resident Phillip Stranger, who lives near a national park.

including one household which lost their principal place of residence.

The interviewees had undertaken a range of activities to prepare for a fire. These included extensive preparation of the home and surrounding land, investment in fire defence resources and household discussions about whether to stay or leave in the event of a fire.

However, some interviewees had not carried out any preparation and were unaware of the policy and practice of encouraging residents to consider their options well before a fire event.

No interviewee household had a written bushfire survival plan in place, although five of the nine had an agreed current plan. Four of these had considered their capacity to defend their home. Among these were two that presented as best prepared to do so. Households that had had prior experience

SUMMARY

Two fires in the Grampians, Victoria, in 2005/06 raised questions over the safety of people with special needs living in the area during bushfires. This prompted a small exploratory interview study to more formally elicit perspectives from nine households on the interaction of special needs and fire preparedness. This was followed by a researcher/agency workshop where the implications of the research were examined, particularly in relation to the vulnerability of those with special needs, their requirements for education, and the impact of these factors on agency planning and coordination.

The results highlighted a range of critical issues, including the importance of households having a realistic understanding of the risks they face, as well as the information and services they require to make a household plan and respond accordingly.

The study concluded that issues with households with complex needs needed to be addressed, as did community expectations and what the concept of 'shared responsibility' meant. Local knowledge and informal networks also needed to be recognised and explored. Agencies, both mainstream and emergency services, also need to work at clarifying their roles and responsibilities to each other and to the community.

ABOUT THIS FIRE NOTE

This research is part of Bushfire CRC Project C7 Evaluation of Community Safety Programs, within Program C: Community Self-Sufficiency for Fire Safety.

The Authors: at the time this research was carried out, Dr Helen Goodman (pictured) was Bushfire CRC Research Fellow at RMIT's School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning; Dr Helen Rosenbaum is an independent social researcher; Alan Rhodes is Manager, Research and Evaluation, Community Safety, Country Fire Authority, Victoria.

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of a fire were better prepared than the others. Only one had attended a community education meeting on fire prior to the fire event and three households attended community meetings during the fire events.

Important sources of information during the fire event included ABC Radio and the local general store, which acted as a base from which information was informally passed around the community. Other sources of information were friends, family and neighbours, the CFA, and visual and environmental cues (smelling smoke and seeing the flames advancing). Official sources of information were regarded as inaccurate or out-of-date.

Several participants appeared to experience difficulty in piecing together information in a way that helped them to act appropriately. Some appeared not to trust the information they were given by others, some could not identify with the place names being mentioned on the radio, some deemed the risk exaggerated, and some had not experienced a fire and did not know what to expect. The interviewee with hearing loss visited her local CFA station but could not hear the conversation and thus did not gain information that she could apply to her situation.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Workshop participants discussed the education of and vulnerability of those with special needs, and agency planning and coordination. They concluded that agencies must:

- seek to identify how they link to each other and to communities, in relation to their roles in working with community members
- seek to identify where the links are between the different phases of emergency management (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery) and how these links can be strengthened. Two examples include better road signage and consistency in the shire boundaries and road names (preparedness) and a good system for registering when people leave during an emergency and where they go (response)
- find ways to understand what community members already know, what they see as their particular needs for assistance, and how they can become active participants in emergency management decision making
- recognise that there is no one formula that can be applied to the various circumstances and needs of these households. Agencies should aim to create opportunities for education in supportive environments while people work through how they wish to prepare for and respond to an emergency of this magnitude
- note that a major barrier to agency coordination is that both agencies and communities lack an understanding

END USER STATEMENT

“In many Victorian rural communities the vulnerability of people is increasing. With an ageing population, the number of people with disabilities increases and the sea/tree change phenomena has brought newcomers who may not be supported by local networks and often have limited knowledge of fire behaviour and emergency management planning. By engaging appropriately with vulnerable communities, the challenges that individuals face in developing effective fire plans can be better understood.

“The Grampians experiences advocate for a consistent, multi-agency approach to engaging vulnerable communities and individuals in emergency management planning. By creating opportunities through forums, a highly interactive model of community education has been created. Accessible venues, communication and transport enhance these opportunities for community engagement. By working in partnership, emergency services, local government, aged care and disability service providers and community organisations contribute significantly to effective emergency management planning, particularly with vulnerable individuals. Identifying the roles, responsibilities and capacities of all stakeholders, including vulnerable communities, will clarify emergency management planning and identify gaps within the shared responsibility paradigm.

“Helen Goodman’s research and the outcomes of this – the Fire Forums – demonstrate that increased promotion of the principle of access and inclusion for all facilitates community engagement and emergency management planning. The outcomes will create the opportunity for better-connected communities that can improve community safety and wellbeing.”

– Sharon Rawlings,
Community Development Coordinator, CFA Barwon/Corangamite Area

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of the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies involved in emergencies. Agencies must work harder at making clearer to themselves – and to community members – the roles and responsibilities of local government, mainstream human services and emergency services.

HOW THE RESEARCH IS BEING USED

Five forums were carried out, which were designed to offer people with special needs and their families hands-on assistance to develop fire plans. These forums were facilitated by Central Grampians Rural Access.

In addition, one of the local government areas involved in the research widened its Emergency Management and Emergency Recovery Committee structures so as to address issues of planning for people with special needs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

All community members need to attain a realistic understanding of the risks they face, be helped to develop realistic expectations of the emergency services, and be offered the resources to develop appropriate household plans, including the ability to conduct self-assessments of their capacity to deal with fire threats.

Where social or medical conditions prevent greater involvement of households in their own planning, agencies need to consider how best to facilitate this. Households with a member with special needs can be helped in a variety of ways to educate themselves and educative materials need to be modified to meet their needs. Issues with socially isolated households need to be addressed, as do community expectations and what shared responsibility actually means. Local knowledge and informal networks need to be explored.

The work of agencies across the service spectrum, mainstream and emergency services, need to keep working at communicating with each other and developing publicly available accounts of the various roles and responsibilities of all parties in the sector, that are designed to make communities safer.

FURTHER READING

Rosenbaum, H., Goodman, H. & Rhodes, A. (2008). *Bushfire safety for people with special needs*. Final Report. [Available on the Bushfire CRC website.]

Disability Emergency Management Advocacy (DEMA) <http://www.advocacyhouse.org/library/acl/reports.shtml>