Effective Communication for Community Adaptation to Bushfire in a Changing Climate:

A toolkit for local government

CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATIONS AND WORK

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bushfire CRC

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Kingborough and Huon Valley areas

Kingborough area

Kingston & Kingston Beach
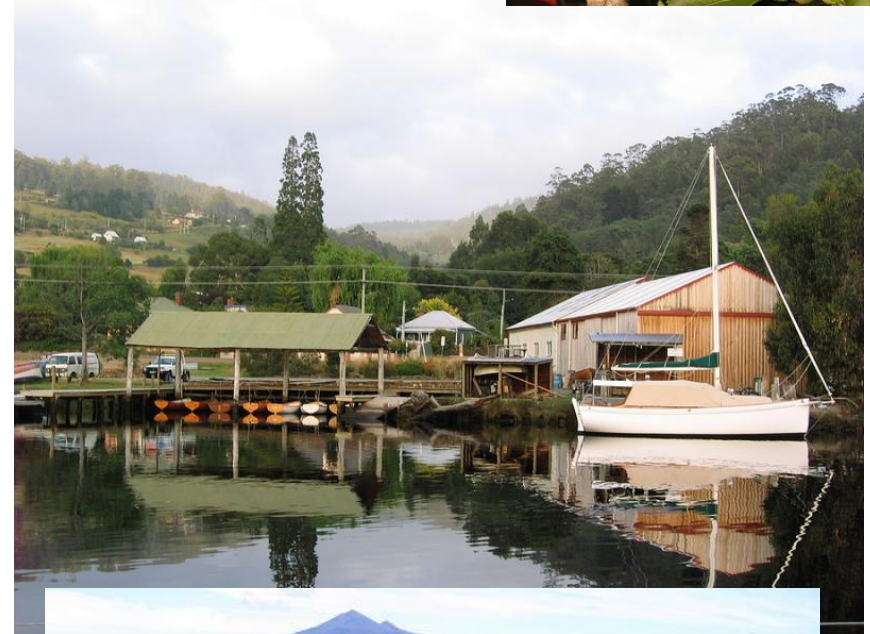
Tinderbox Peninsula & Kettering

The Huon Valley

Hounville and Cygnet

Franklin and Dover

Need for Community Adaptation Toolkit

- Climate change predictions in south east Tasmania during the remainder of this century

- Rapid demographic and socio-economic changes Kingborough & Huon Valley Municipalities are exposing more people to the risk of bushfire

- General lack of awareness (last significant bushfire was on 7 February ('Black Tuesday') 1967

Climate change & bushfire risk in South East Tasmania

Current situation

- Now 2 peak bushfire times
- Winter 2011 was wettest in 50 years
- Hottest weather on record last summer

Predictions

- More heavy precipitation events & longer periods of dryness
- Predicted increase in extreme fire weather events by as much as 50 per cent by the end of the century

(White et al. 2010)

Rural-urban interface communities

Structural and demographic changes

- Amenity migration
- An ageing population
- Nature of urban development/availability of cheaper land
- New transport infrastructure enables commuting

Diversity and complexity

- Often dramatic differences in annual income, length and type of residency, environmental knowledge and bushfire experience
- Such diversity influences how residents **understand** bushfire risk and **their capacity** to engage in awareness and preparedness activities

  (Eriksen & Prior 2011)

A role for local government in community bushfire preparedness?

- *Tasmanian Emergency Management Plan (2009)* - requires local government to:

  - Identify, research, assess and treat risks
  - Represent community interests for emergency management to other levels of government and contribute to decision making processes
  - Develop and implement municipal community awareness and education programs and warning systems

- Draft of the **Tasmanian Bushfire Policy** recommends greater interaction between local government and TFS as part of the bushfire planning process to address the needs of individual communities

- Will **compliment** the community engagement activities of the TFS

Research Methodology

- 51 interviews during July, August and October, 2011

- Males (45%) and females (55%)

- Age groups:

  18-44 (16.4%)

  45-54 (26.5%)

  55-64 (26.5%)

  65+   (30.6%)

- Participants recruited by snowball method
  o community groups
  o community centres
  o local government officers
  o some media coverage

Findings from interviews

1. Many new residents lack awareness of bushfire risk

2. Often a gap between bushfire risk awareness and preparedness actions due to trade-offs people make between lifestyle choice, environmental and economic values

3. Distinct ageing of the population which is increasing dependence on emergency services

4. Evidence of some dis-engagement in household preparedness and response to bushfire amongst women

5. Some individuals are engaging other community members, through personal networks, to increase household preparedness

Findings from existing research

- **Frail elderly populations**
  - An 'unrealistic reliance on emergency service provision
  - Poor help seeking behaviours across personal networks
  - Denial of risk
  - Older males often have strong feelings about their right to 'Stay and Defend'
  - A sense that factors such as luck or faith would act to protect from fire risk'

  (Yarra Ranges Council 2010)

- **Residential status**
  - Part-time residents don't want to spend their limited time doing bushfire mitigation work
  - Want to enjoy the recreational and outdoor activities afforded by the landscape

  (Brenkert-Smith 2010)

Findings from existing research -2

- **The awareness gap: everyday lives and perceptions of bushfire risk**
  - Home owners who commute have little time for preparedness measures, so opt for home insurance and will leave during a bushfire event
  - Longer term residents, who have greater emotional attachment to place, more inclined to 'stay and defend'

    (Eriksen and Gill 2010)

- **Women and bushfire preparedness**
  - Often lack of knowledge transfer between household members in preparedness and what to do during a bushfire (Eriksen et al 2010)
  - Evidence from flood & earthquake studies that women more likely to evacuate and men will stay and defend homes

Findings from existing research -3

- **Community, social networks and bushfire safety**

  Informal conversations and social networks can play a significant role in community resilience or how a community responds or recovers from a natural disaster such as bushfire because:

  - They create opportunities for residents/owners that have a shared risk, to exchange information
  - They can lead to neighbours undertaking actions to address their shared risk
  - They can contribute to the formation of social attachments

  (Brenkert-Smith 2010)

- **Why a program must be institutionalised**

  - McGee (2011) found that the involvement of government agencies was crucial in encouraging residents to become involved in FireSmart-Forest Wise (Canada), Community Fireguard & Firewise communities (USA)
  - Links developed between residents and agencies improved broader relationships between government agencies and residents

Structure of Toolkit

1. Communicating with diverse groups and communities

2. Suggested changes to local government processes

3. Community events

4. Community volunteers

5. Position description for Council officer

Toolkit Templates

1. Communicating with diverse groups and communities

- Elderly people

- New residents

- Women

- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Groups

- Indigenous communities

- Environmental Values and Lifestyle Choices

- Low income groups

- People with special needs

- Involving businesses

Elderly residents - possible actions

- Develop information brochures that are specifically for elderly citizens

- Use Community Health Centres, Senior Citizens groups for distribution of information

- Involve local service organisations (e.g. Lions Clubs) in helping elderly residents prepare their homes

- Provide onsite visit from an 'informed' person to assist with understanding risks and how to prepare

- Try to encourage less dependence on agencies by facilitating greater involvement from family, friends, neighbours or personal carers

- Assist elderly residents to in develop a relocation kit

New residents - possible actions

- Information in their Welcome Pack

- Information with their first rates notice

- Organise a visit by a council officer or fire brigade member to help people understand the bushfire risk

- Provide specific residents with information about how and when their property may be 'un-defendable' if there is poor access, or excessive over hanging trees and foliage along their road

Communicating with women

"The people that you want to educate are the mothers. If you can educate these women, then things will happen in families. You can educate kids as much as you like but they're got no legitimate power when they go home" (HUV 04)

- Use Community Health Centres as contact points for women

- A particularly focus should be on women with young families - consider involving Child Care centres as a way to distribute preparedness information

- Organise community forums for women as we know they will leave early in the event of a bushfire, and this requires real preparation

Environmental values & lifestyle choices

- Provide information about what to do in the event of a bushfire to members of Bushcare, Coastcare and other environmental groups

- Provide information about fire resistant building materials on council website

- Engage these residents through discussion on responsible ecological burns and the protection of flora and fauna

- Send longer term residents a copy of the 'un-defendable' process letter

*"The message needs to be a message which will be acceptable to each individual. So giving a message to clear 30 metres [is] not acceptable, we're not listening. They didn't come to this environment to live in a 60 metre clearing. They came to live in close connection with the bush. These people need to be given a message of how they can do that and protect their infrastructure and protect their own safety and the safety of visitors" (*HUV12)

Toolbox templates - 2

2. Suggested changes to local government processes

- Using data more effectively
- Inclusions in welcome pack
- Annual grants for community groups
- Council Website

Changes to local government processes

Using data more effectively

* Contact new home ownesr to ask if they have updated their Bushfire Management Plan

* Include some information about preparing your house on the Council Rates Notice

Inclusions in welcome pack

* TFS booklet *Bushfire: Prepare to Survive* Kit

* Copy of the relevant TFS Community Protection Plan

* Contact details to obtain more community level bushfire information

* Copy of an area bushfire risk map

Toolbox Templates - 3

3. Community events

- Annual Community Bushfire Awareness Day
- Regular Community Meetings/Forums
- Provision of Community Information

4. Community Volunteers

- Roles
- Training

5. Position Description for Council Officer

Role of community volunteers

- Dissemination of bushfire preparedness information to residents

- Use their personal networks to establish connections with new and part-time residents

- Ability to arrange local fire brigade member to visit residents to assist with developing a bushfire survival plan

- Involvement in organising community events to raise awareness

- Acting as a contact point during a bushfire so that information about people who have chosen to leave their home can be passed onto the local fire brigade

"The problem is we need to have some sort of a network where they can let people know they have left. Otherwise you're worrying that they're up there" (Kingborough volunteer fire fighter)

Sustainability of the program

1. Must be institutionalised within local government
   - Must be adequately resourced
   - Senior management must be engaged

2. Communication must be <u>with and between</u> communities and local government
   - Flexible approach needed to allow volunteers to find what works in their community with a diversity of groups

'it has to start from the people, but then be supported. Not taken over, but be supported in some way ... I find that community interest grows when there is a bit of a buzz about something; other people begin to want to be a part of that… It has to start really with the people, maybe being supported by external services' (Kingborough resident)

References

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- Rowel, R, Sheikhattari, P, Barber, TM & Evans-Holland, M 2010, 'A Guide to Enhance Grassroots Risk Communication Among Low-Income Populations', Morgan State University School Of Public Health And Policy

- White, CJ, Fox-Hughes, P, Grose, MR, Bennett, JC, Holz, GK, Gaynor, S & Bindoff, NL 2010, Implications for fire danger in bushfire prone areas of Tasmania, Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre, Compiled by Climate Futures for Tasmania, Hobart

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