

Project C6: Stay and Defend or Leave Early

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Our goal is to enhance community safety and resilience. A fundamental element of Australia bushfire safety is the emphasis on staying and defending your property or leaving early. Our aim is to identify potential impediments to implementation and to suggest improvements.

Previous posters and papers set out the overall details of the project and the evidence base for the policy. Here we highlight the current case study work and recent legal research that has been undertaken in this area.

NE Victoria Case Study

By Amalie Tibbits

'I had no choice about being at home as I was needed by the Red Cross. I put the community before my own needs. I brought the garden furniture in, locked the door and left my house in the hands of God' (22)

The available evidence that 'houses protect people and people protect houses' is strong. However, there is tension between the ideology and practical need of asking those at risk to take more responsibility for managing their own risks.¹

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held in five towns - Mt Beauty, Beechworth, Bright, Omeo and Mitta Mitta.

A total of 74 people attended.

The aim of the focus groups was to investigate impediments to the 'stay or go' policy in the context of the 2003 bushfires.

To stay or evacuate?

- Most people were committed to staying.
- Some participants felt evacuation was impractical.
- Decisions to stay often included contingency plans for late evacuation.
- The decision was fluid, changing with circumstance.
- Many households felt they did not have the choice, but were bound to stay or evacuate by their circumstance

Influences

Influences to stay or go included:

- confidence the property was defensible;
- physical and mental ability to defend;
- level of preparation, particularly having a reliable water supply;
- responsibility for stock;
- responsibility to organisations such as the CFA;
- Family and work commitments.



The Law of Evacuation (revised)

By Elsie Loh

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the current legal position in Australia and to help rescuers and Emergency Services Organisations alike, understand the extent to which they are immune from being sued by the members of the public.

It is an aim of this paper to make clear that, despite the incongruity in the Australian emergency law, the policy governing the law is clear – that rescuers are to be encouraged and the law in all states and territories generally ensure that all (but the most foolish and negligent) acts are excused in the face of an emergency such as a fire threat.



Risks of volunteer fire fighters: How real are they?

By Elsie Loh

There is a total of 222,249 volunteers serving in the various State and Territory fire services organisations in Australia. This is compared to the 14,222 full time equivalent paid fire-fighters in the country. There is no doubt that the fire service in Australia will be severely crippled should any of the volunteers cease serving because of any fears of personal liability arising in the course of their volunteering.

States and territories alike have introduced volunteers protection provisions into legislation over six years. This paper outlines the extent of volunteer fire-fighters are protected by these legislation (including the exceptions to the immunities).

Other Case studies:

USA – SAN DIEGO FIRES

- A major urban interface fire with compulsory evacuation.
- There was a significant death toll.
- Aim is to study the factors surrounding evacuation and lost lives in a different context as a way of gaining additional insight into the stay or go approach.
- Initial fieldwork is planned for July 05.

Canberra

- Main urban interface case;
- Completed a round of interviews and collected data on losses [draft report - confidential];
- Following-up enquiries focused on staying or evacuation; and the social and economic impact of the fire.

South Australia

- Work undertaken by Mae Proudley jointly with Project C7;
- Reports are currently being prepared.

Sydney – Community Fire Units

- Work undertaken by Tom Lowe in collaboration with NSW Fire Brigades;
- Major survey currently being undertaken.

¹ Handmer, J. & Tibbits, A., 2005, 'Is Staying at home the safest option during bushfires? Historical evidence for an Australian Approach', *Environmental Hazards* Vol 6, Issue 2, 81-91.

Photo: Courtesy of Ruth Brooks, Community Safety, North East Region, CFA.

Cartoon: Leunig, M., 1981, *The Bedtime Leunig*, Angus and Robertson Publishers