

# Fired up? Understanding the disconnect between bushfire awareness and preparedness amongst diverse rural landowners

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## Positioning Bushfire in Changing Rural Landscapes

- Amenity led migration from urban environments into rural places has resulted in significant demographic, structural and environmental changes. It has not only resulted in population growth but also a rapid re-composition of rural populations, as urban migrants purchase land, often subdivided farmland, whilst the more traditional rural population age or decline. They bring lifestyles and values more commonly associated with urban areas into rural places.
- They are attracted by favourable real estate prices, geographical location, high amenity values, visual appeal, together with space and privacy, which make it possible for city careers to be combined with rural lifestyles.
- Many of these new rural landowners have no history of bushfire in their families. This has important bushfire safety implications because the lack of basic knowledge amongst many of these landowners increases their degree of vulnerability to bushfire.
- The results and quotes on this poster are from a study examining landowners' perceptions of bushfire and the significant factors that influence relationships with bushfire in three new rural landscapes in New South Wales - Windellama, Kangaroo Valley and the Oakdale area.

### Quotes reflecting landowners' bushfire awareness, attitudes and preparedness:

*"Bureaucrats in offices in Sydney make decisions on what happens out here and those decisions are fundamentally wrong as they don't live here."*

*"I am more worried due to the lack of controlled burn off from farmers. The 'Greenies' have seen to that. Underlying dead fuel is a real threat."*

*"I've learnt a lot. City farmers don't know much. Myself included."*

*"I should clear more around the house but I regret destroying natural bush."*

## Distinguishing between Bushfire Awareness, Attitudes and Preparedness

- Despite the variety of new rural landowners' environmental beliefs, lifestyle, education and upbringing, there appears generally to be a good awareness amongst landowners of local bushfire threats.
- This bushfire awareness, however, often does not translate into bushfire preparedness due to attitudes towards bushfire and natural resource management, which influence if, how and to what extent landowners prepare for bushfire events.
- These attitudes range from apathy, 'it won't happen here', disengagement by women, transfer of responsibility to others, distrust of authority, distrust of farmers, to environmental concerns. They are shaped by gender roles, lifestyle, social pressure, environmental beliefs, trust issues and inadequate knowledge.
- 73% (N=348) think they are very-satisfactorily prepared for bushfire. Only 45% perceive their local community to have the same level of preparedness.
- Only 43% have a bushfire action plan despite 64% of landowners intend on staying and defending their property regardless of their level of preparedness.

### Quotes reflecting gender issues:

*"Well, I'll make them as many sandwiches as they like but I'm not going out into a bushfire and fighting it."*

*"Certainly in terms of volunteering to do things, it's really difficult when you work full-time and for me it's the hours, there's no way! I can't even go to a CWA meeting. You know, they're just not designed for commuting working mummies..."*

*"The bigger fear is that he's out somewhere. There is no mobile range here. There is no contacting people. Once I phoned up to say there is a lot of smoke and I can smell burning, where's it from? And I was obviously by myself, I think I had one of the kids with me. Like, you've got to be able to talk to somebody. Like, what do I do? I can't even turn on the pumps. I have to have him telling me what to do!"*

## Transforming Bushfire Awareness into Action

- The lack of basic bushfire knowledge amongst many new rural landowners, such as fire behaviour locally, rules and regulations, who to contact, and their actual management ability in relation to this knowledge, increases their degree of vulnerability to bushfire.
- All of these issues could to a certain degree be addressed through interactive local workshops and training sessions. Such empowerment opportunities require legislation within emergency services to provide more support and funding for local community education initiatives.
- This study highlights the need for bushfire safety training on two different levels. One is the need for all new rural landowners to attend basic bushfire safety courses offered by local fire brigades to give them a basic understanding of bushfire in a local context.
- There is also a need for training specifically aimed at women. Survey (N=348) and interview (N=38) results show a higher level of apathy, denial or feeling of helplessness amongst women. The reasons why women tend not to engage with bushfire management range from social pressure, deferral of responsibility, disbelief in personal capacity to act, to the inability to make informed decisions due to inadequate knowledge.
- The challenge for fire emergency services is to reorient current community education driven by State and national defined curricula, to meet the need for local, context specific, and interactive initiatives that appeal to new rural landowners and empower local communities by addressing gender roles, environmental beliefs, lifestyle, social pressure, trust issues as well as inadequate knowledge.

(Study area photographs by C. Eriksen, 2008; Map by Google Earth; San Diego fire photographer unknown, 2007; Quotes by Windellama, Kangaroo Valley, Oakdale landowners, 2008-9)