

Determining Effective Wildfire Communication in New Zealand

E.R. (Lisa) Langer¹ and Mary Hart²

¹ Rural Fire Research Group, Scion, Christchurch, New Zealand; ² Validatus Research, Christchurch, New Zealand

New Zealand communities generally :

- Experience infrequent small fires
- Under-prepared and vulnerable to wildfires
- Individuals lack awareness and underestimate wildfire risk.

Effective communication :

Key to minimising the number of human-caused fires and hence the impact wildfires have on communities.

Three cases studies:

- Atawhai, near Nelson – rural-urban interface community
- Closeburn, near Queenstown – tree-change/tourism community
- Mahia Peninsula, East Coast North Island – traditional farming /rural community.

Research aim:

To analyse the most effective communication strategies to inform and educate communities about wildfire risk and preparedness.

Methods:

- 50 community participants
- 30 local and national fire/land manager participants
- Face to face interviews and small focus groups
- Same methodology as RMIT University project.



Research findings:

- Minimal awareness of wildfire risk and unprepared communities where infrequent fires (Atawhai and Mahia)
- Some preparedness for natural hazards rather than specifically for wildfires (Atawhai and Mahia)
- High wildfire risk awareness and better prepared communities where more frequent fires, community plan and active community fire wardens (Closeburn)
- Each community is different – need to understand each community and build on their existing networks
- Strong community networks – focal points, e.g. preschools, primary schools, Māori marae, churches, local store and volunteer brigades
- Minimal uptake of traditional communication – newspaper, radio, TV and signs
- Communication to visitors needs targeted efforts.

Need effective and targeted communication to work with communities to reduce vulnerability and increase preparedness for wildfires.

