

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE - ISN'T THERE?

Understanding community response to the threat of the Eyre Peninsula bushfire

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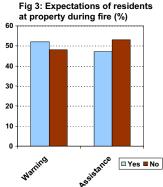
Did people recognise the threat from the fire?

In January 2005 the people of the Lower Eyre Peninsula, SA faced a major bushfire. Nine people died, 93 houses were destroyed and approximately 80,000 ha were destroyed. This study by CRC program C6 and C7 investigated how people responded to the threat. The poster presents results from part of the study and focuses on whether people recognised the threat posed by the bushfire between the time of ignition on the afternoon of 10 January and the rapid spread of the fire late the next morning. Extensive (survey) and intensive (in-depth interviews) research methods were used to describe and explain the response of householders to the bushfire threat.



Figure1: Protective action decision model (Lindell)

Figure 2: Expectations of what would happen with Wangary fire (%)



The survey of nearly 300 households in the fire affected area revealed that:

•78% knew 11 January was a total fire ban day

•87% knew there had been a bushfire at Wangary the previous afternoon.

However, only 24% expected that the fire would spread and was

likely to affect the area where they lived (Figure 2)
Further,

•54% expected a warning about a bushfire

47% expected assistance if a bushfire occurred (figure 3)

As a result of failing to recognise the threat many people went about their normal routine on the morning of 11 January, only to later have to take improvised protective action when the threat became more evident. Some people however did anticipate the threat and initiated more appropriate protective action.

How can we explain the different patterns of recognition of the threat?

Social structures

such as

such as

Social networks

Structure of livelihood

Formal warning structure

Give rise to mechanisms

Power to generate and communicate shared meaning Particular relationship to land and environment

Power to alert and provide credible information about the threat



That in certain circumstances as illustrated in case studies

Enable or

constrain particular choices and actions

Case 1 Large scale farmers, planning for sons' farm future. Several farming connections in wider family. Livelihood predominantly grain growing, with sheep. Wife has small business interest off farm. Husband has been a CFS member for a number of years.

Networks: Family were in the middle of their holidays and returned briefly to attend a business dinner late on 10th January. Approaching their district they noticed smoke in the distance, and also that the fire shed door was open and the truck gone. Husband rang neighbour (also CFS member) who was on the fire ground, and received an update on the fire. They cancelled their dinner engagement and husband joined local fire crew for night shift, returning home to sleep around 7am. He asked this same neighbour to ring if things deteriorated. Husband said he had an uneasy feeling on returning home after fire duty.

Livelihood: Husband and wife were constantly vigilant about fire due to their livelihood as grain growers, where they used fire in managing farm to burn stubble. Husband recounted at some length how quickly a fire from machinery when reaping can get away, and said he worried a lot about this eventuality. Husband and wife spoke about the difficulty in neighbourhood relations when some farmers were less cautious about harvesting on bad days. The husband commented that "those in the CFS know when they should be reaping and when not".

Warning: Interviewees did not mention receiving formal warning

Despite the lack of formal warning the family's social network provided access to critical information about fire and its spread. The husband's CFS membership and farming background provided trusted knowledge and skills to recognise the risk, assess danger to family and their neighbours, enabling them to initiate protective action.

Case 2 "Lifestyle" farmers. Three younger adults – husband, wife, two young children, and wife's brother. Property jointly owned with wife's father, residing elsewhere; daughter and son in law work off farm. Small acreage, some heritage listed, some sheep on property. Networks: On the morning of 11 Jan. wife aware of it being grey and dark in town, with high winds, with clothes racks blowing over in the street. "Should we shut the door so smoke doesn't get in on [shop goods]?" Different sources warned all three adults during the morning, that the fire may affect them. Tended to minimise or disbelieve the information. Husband and wife subsequently returned independently to property. The wife was curious about lack of formal warning, 'specially as they lived so close to brigade fire shed', and why there were no roadblocks as she returned. Brother, concerned about smoke rang father who suggested that if the smoke was not heading in their direction they would probably be alright. Suggested son could go to the fire ground, lend a hand, and find out what was happening. The front arrived too quickly for this to occur. Interviewees conscious of grandfather (dec.) who was very fire conscious and active CFS member.

<u>Livelihood</u>: All interviewees except the younger brother work in Port Lincoln in non-agricultural pursuits. Interviewees had only moved out from town a few years prior to the fire. All three said they were under prepared and reported fire behaviour which they did not expect or understand.

Warning: interviewees did not mention receiving formal warning.

The lack of formal warning, very limited knowledge of fire in the local environment and social networks that were no better informed or credible resulted in the interviewees tending to disbelieve the threat. Hence they failed to assess its significance until very late and were forced to take last minute and hazardous action to escape the fire.