

# EXPERIENCES OF THE 2003 CANBERRA BUSHFIRE

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## Introduction

Two and a half years after the Canberra bushfires (2003) interviews were carried out with residents in the suburb of Chapman, a suburb heavily impacted by the bushfire. The objective was to develop a narrative of people's experiences before, during and after the fire event.

## Methodology

17 qualitative, semi-structured interviews, to identify:

- how the event unfolded,
- levels of house preparedness,
- actions people took to defend their properties,
- crucial decision making factors affecting whether to stay and defend or evacuate,
- and advice for others faced with a similar circumstance

## Four Key themes

### ① Low awareness of Bushfire Threat to Homes

*"About 1 o'clock I went for a walk up on the hill to have a look. I could see the fire was getting closer, ..., once again I wasn't overly concerned, ....(long way to come) and would have to come over open grass land. Chance of that happening was not very great"*

### ② Last Minute Preparedness

Many interviewees implemented actions advised by neighbours, as well as imitating what neighbours were doing.

*"We had to fill the bath, buckets and wet towels and get hoses ready and stay with our homes...I did all that was asked and then suggested we get into thicker more suitable clothes if we were going to be putting out fires. This we did."*

### ③ The decision to stay and defend or evacuate

The decision whether to stay and defend or to evacuate was often made on the day and open to change in response to the immediate situation.

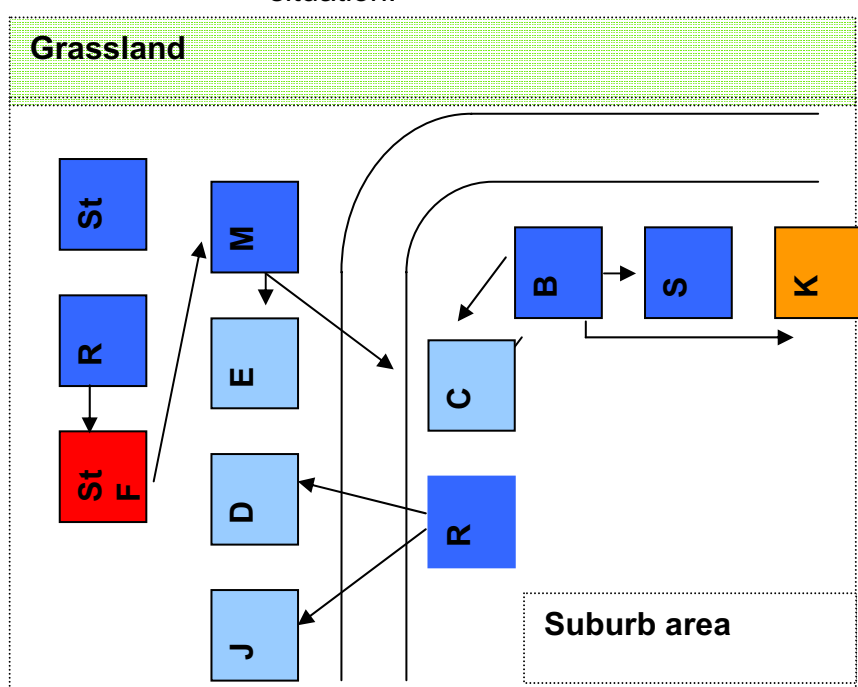


Figure 2 People movement

*"...a policeman appeared out of the smoke. He said 'Lady you are about to explode, the whole area is about to explode'.... He took the hose from me and hosed me down, front and back, and told me to go and get into that police car."*

### ④ People movement

There was a flux of people into, around and out of the fire-affected area. Figure 2 shows the movement of householders in one of the case study areas.

## Lessons for future

- People responded quickly and effectively when practical advice was provided
- When asked, most people stated that they would be prepared to stay and defend in a similar situation.
- Property preparedness was the most significant change interviewees would like to make in the future.
- Personal preparedness was also considered crucial

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