

Improving community preparedness for bushfire: the rationale behind the Tasmanian bushfire DVD, and what follows

Abstract

Bushfires burn out of control in many parts of Australia each summer, costing the Australian community more than any other natural disaster.

To mitigate bushfire losses, COAG's 2004 *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* (the Bushfire Inquiry) recommended *inter alia*, that a position be adopted nationally which encourages residents to prepare their homes for bushfire and to make informed decisions about whether to stay and defend them or leave. The Bushfire Inquiry further recommended that the implementation of such a policy 'must be fully integrated with effective community education programs to improve preparedness and support timely and informed decision making'.

In response, the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) re-developed its position on community safety during bushfires. This position has subsequently been adopted by all Australian fire agencies. The position recognises that individuals and households share responsibility for bushfire mitigation with fire agencies.

Clearly, the effectiveness of the position is dependent on its widespread adoption by those at risk. Previous efforts in Tasmania to encourage residents to understand their exposure to bushfire risk and take responsibility for it have had mixed results.

The Bushfire DVD and the powerful messages it contains about risk, preparedness, property defence and safe re-location reached all Tasmanian homes in bush-fire prone areas early in the 2006-07 bushfire season. Subsequent research indicates that a significant proportion of households responded positively to the DVD and prepared their homes so they could be defended in what became Tasmania's worst bushfire season in decades.

The DVD played a significant role in reducing the social, economic and environmental impact of last summer's bushfires, and is expected to continue to influence householders' preparedness and decision-making for some time.

The DVD is also a useful tool for communicating the 'prepare, stay and defend or leave early' position to other key stakeholders, including career and volunteer fire-fighters, land management agencies and the police service.

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