

100 years of building losses due to Bushfire: What have we learnt?

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This talk will review and extend previous analyses of the bush (wildland) fire risk to the built environment in Australia. The most salient result is that the annual probability of building destruction has remained almost constant over the last century despite large obvious demographic and social changes as well as improvements in fire fighting technique and resources. Most historical losses have taken place in extreme fires with an average return period of a decade or two and which when repeated are likely to overwhelm even the most professional of fire services. Because of these observations and despite predictions of an increasing likelihood of conditions favouring bushfires under global climate change, we suspect that building losses are unlikely to alter dramatically in the near future. In particular, without strong political leadership and regulatory pressure preventing development adjacent to bushland, the prospects for further significant loss events, such as the Ash Wednesday fires, in which 2300 homes were destroyed and 75 people lost their lives, will remain unchanged.