

Household Preparedness and Response in Major Wildfires in Australia

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Abstract

Australian fire services and land management agencies are increasingly seeking to engage the community in managing the wildfire risk. Since 2001 Australia has experienced a number of major wildfires across a diverse range of geographical and social contexts. Post fire surveys of community attitudes, preparedness and response have been undertaken after several of these events: Sydney interface 2001/02, Victorian high country 2003, Eyre Peninsula 2005, and Victoria 2006. Together these findings reveal important patterns in how households think about and deal with the wildfire risk.

The paper highlights some of the key findings across the four studies relating to awareness of the wildfire risk, the nature and level of household preparedness, the way people respond to the threat of wildfire and the role of information during these events. The findings highlight the complexity and diversity of household response. An important issue discussed in the paper is the extent of adoption of the Australian 'stay and defend or leave early' policy supported by all agencies as an alternative to evacuation. The paper also highlights the growing importance attached to the role of warnings and information flow to the community and identifies some of the challenges faced by agencies if they seek to address community expectations. The findings also raise critical issues related to the role of education about wildfire, and the ways agencies need to interact with people if they wish the community to play a more active role in dealing with the wildfire risk.

The paper concludes that an active role for the community is critical in achieving a safer community but highlights the limitations of the approach and many of the issues involved in effectively implementing it. Such a critical perspective is essential if agencies are to recognise and deal with the challenges of engaging the community in managing the wildfire risk.

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