

# Bushfire CRC Update

## → Bushfires and the media

*A Bushfire CRC project is looking at how agencies can better engage with the media*

- ▶ The bushfires in Victoria's Grampians district last summer revealed that the mass media, and in particular radio, are now central to the core practice of preparing for and fighting bushfires in Australia.

In 2005 ABC Local Radio signed a Memorandum of Understanding with emergency services organisations in Victoria. Accordingly, the ABC began operating as the official emergency broadcaster in Victoria. This agreement is beneficial for fire agencies that see radio as an important tool for communicating timely warnings to threatened communities.

In the wake of the Grampians bushfires researchers from the Media Studies Program at La Trobe University conducted focus group-based research, in the small communities of Laharum and Wartook.

The social diversity amongst residents living in this area meant there was a broad range of views of the role of the media before, during and after the fires. The aim of the focus group research was to hear the participants' experiences with, and responses to, the media and to gain a better understanding of the ways these residents used the media before and during the fires.

An initial analysis of the focus group discussions reveal it is essential that media reports are based on local knowledge. Participants described their need to obtain specific information during the fires and identified their local ABC Radio as the most relevant source for such information (both before and during fires).



However, official warnings fail where local knowledge is perceived to be absent, such as in the case of mispronunciation of road names and the use of old maps that contain historical rather than contemporary names. Not surprisingly, participants expressed anger with media reports that tended to be generic and sensational and reported that in such cases those reports may create anxiety and were not helpful.

It also became evident that media use is only one part of a comprehensive process of information gathering from different sources that are used by residents in fire-prone areas. E-mail and the Web are emerging as an important source of information and communication before and during fires, yet radio is perceived to be the most useful and beneficial source.

An extended research report will analyse the results of the focus group discussions in more detail. It is expected that the findings of this research project will have implications for the content and style of bushfire-related reports and warnings presented by emergency broadcasters.



### → ABOUT THE PROJECT

This research is part of Bushfire CRC Project C4 on Effective Risk Communication conducted by Associate Professor Peter White, Dr Peter Hughes and Dr Erez Cohen, of the Media Studies Program, La Trobe University.

The project has produced a literature review of related research and reports on *The Media and Fire Services and Reporting Bushfires: What motivates the Media?* Bushfire CRC members can read them at: [www.bushfirecrc.com](http://www.bushfirecrc.com)