

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY MEMBERS' SURVIVAL RELATED DECISION-MAKING DURING BUSHFIRES

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This project aims to better understand survival-related decision making during bushfires by : (a) examining data collected in the aftermath of *Black Saturday*; and (b) studying intentions to respond to anticipated threats.

**In a pilot study, we analysed :** (i) transcripts of interviews with 51 survivors of the *Murrindindi Fire* which struck residents of Marysville, Narbethong, Buxton , and surrounds on 7 February 2009; (ii) evidence given to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission by 15 survivors ('lay witnesses'); and (iii) evidence presented to the Royal Commission about the 38 fatalities on the day.

The diagram below shows the sequence of intentions (fire plans) , actions , and outcomes for the 51 survivors interviewed. Only 47% were able to implement their fire plan.

The experiences reported by the 15 Royal Commission lay witnesses were similar to those of the 51 interviewees.

The evidence concerning fatalities attested to the potentially lethal nature of the environment generated by a severe bushfire.

## Ten important lessons from the *Murrindindi Fire* pilot study about community members' decision making and actions in the face of imminent bushfire threat:

1. Lack of accurate, timely, specific, and personally-relevant information about the fire threat undermines sound survival-related decision making.
2. Communities influence decision making by individual members via shared beliefs about bushfire risk.
3. Advice and information from 'important others' (family, community 'experts') will be major determinants of an individual's decision making—the more so under conditions of uncertainty.
4. What others are observed to be doing is an important determinant of an individual's decision making.--especially in a situation characterised by uncertainty.
5. Under imminent bushfire threat decision making and action is gendered. Men are more likely to stay and defend their property; women are more likely to leave.

6. Single-minded commitment to a bushfire plan may be a path to disaster—especially a plan to stay and defend: have fall-back options.

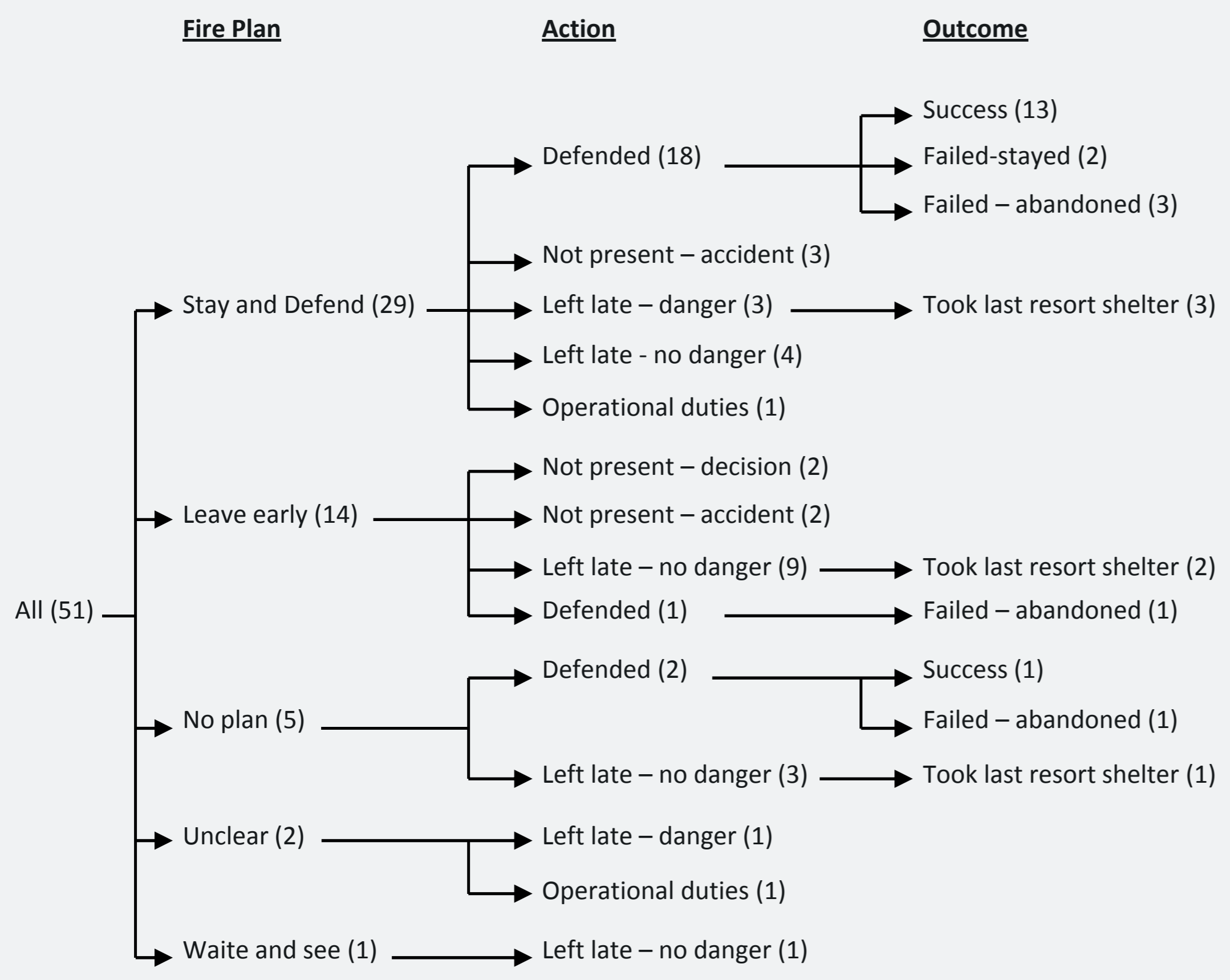
7. The legendary 'Murphy' was an optimist with regards to bushfires: expect and be ready for something really important going seriously wrong at the worst possible time with potentially fatal consequences.

8. Some individuals should not be in a situation where they are at risk of bushfire attack; those: under 18, aged 70 +, with disabilities or other impairments.

9. In *extremis*, an individual's ability to: (a) down-regulate fear and anxiety; (b) maintain an attentional focus on emerging threats from the environment; and (c) keep actions coupled tightly to surviving in a potentially lethal environment will largely determine survival.

10. For a variety of complex reasons, some individuals will choose to act in ways that jeopardise their safety, and the safety of others.

**See:**  
McLennan, J., & Elliott, G. (2010). *Community decision making under the stress of imminent bushfire threat – Murrindindi Fire*. Bushfire CRC Extension, Community Members' Decision Making Under Stress Project. Melbourne: School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University. [jmclennan@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:jmclennan@latrobe.edu.au)



Gallipoli Oval where many residents took last resort shelter

