

# Community responses to bushfire threat: risk perception and preparedness.

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## Do you prepare for bushfires?

Despite the effort that emergency management agencies have directed to encouraging bushfire preparedness in Australia, many community members continue to demonstrate poor knowledge of bushfire hazard and a reluctance to adopt protective measures.

At its most basic, a failure to prepare the home before the bushfire season can be a result of people simply not perceiving they are at risk.

Part of the difficulty emergency management agencies have when communicating risk is identifying the mechanisms by which risk information can be communicated in ways that ensure it is assimilated and acted upon by the public.

### Objective

This project aims to develop active risk communication techniques by collectively exploring the factors that affect people's preparation for bushfires. The research will help emergency management agencies utilise risk communication techniques that better target these factors and increase the likelihood that people will adopt protective behaviours.



### Methodology

Longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data will be collected for a wide range of factors representing individual characteristics, social characteristics, community attributes, institutional aspects and environmental aspects that may influence risk perception and the decision to prepare. This project will use structural equation modelling to describe the interaction between these factors, and their affect on preparation for bushfires.



## Progress

Pilot telephone surveys were carried out in January and February 2006. These identified factors that influenced people's decisions to prepare for bushfires. Some of the more common included:

- **previous experience with fires** - while experience often equated to greater understanding of the need to prepare, in some instances past experience lead to a fatalistic attitude to preparation. "We lost the house in '67. I have a minimalist approach to preparing...it's only a matter of time before we're burnt out again" T62
- **responsibility for protection** - most long-term residents identified they had a responsibility to prepare their homes to reduce community vulnerability. "preparing is being community minded, looking after yourself and your neighbours" (T20)
- **volunteerism/community involvement** - the existence of volunteer fire brigades within a community may increase individual's (whether involved or not) critical awareness of fire hazard. "...after we lost the volunteer brigade you could notice a decrease in preparedness along the street." (T79)
- **risk prioritisation** – the seasonality of fire means that householders simply don't think about fire for most of the year. "our preparation is weather dependent... if it's hot and the wind's from the north, then we start making preparations" (T86)

These factors, along with established measures used to examine preparedness in the context of other hazards, will be explored further in questionnaire surveys to be conducted during the 2006/07 and 2007/08 bushfire seasons.

## Supporting risk communication efforts

Understanding why individuals or family units make the decisions they do requires a deep knowledge of the context in which these decisions must be made.

With bushfire hazard the decision to prepare is made not just at the level of the individual or household, but in collaboration with or under the influence of others. This choice is influenced by family, friends, neighbours, agencies or the resources available to hand.

The risk communication message must be **understandable and meaningful**, providing the mechanisms needed by the individual, family unit or community to better prepare given their particular circumstances.