

STAY AND DEFEND OR LEAVE EARLY: Policy problems and experiences during the 2003 Victorian Bushfires

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Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early

On the whole, Australian fire authorities and the communities they serve have achieved great success in reducing losses of life and property from bushfires. Evidence that ordinary people can protect their homes from bushfires by staying with and actively defending them has informed the development of the ‘Stay and defend or leave early’ policy, which has become the centrepiece of community bushfire safety strategies in Australia. Our research aims to identify and understand problems with the policy and barriers to its implementation. This work contributes to the development of a decision support tool for people living in bushfire prone areas.

Case study: the 2003 Victorian Bushfires

From January to March 2003, bushfires swept across much of southeast Australia, burning 1.12 million hectares of public and private land in North East Victoria and East Gippsland. The fires destroyed 41 houses, tens of thousands of kilometres of fencing, sheds, machinery and other agricultural equipment and killed more than 11, 000 head of stock. Despite this, it is generally agreed that extent of property loss was minimal considering the scale of the event.



Focus group research

A series of focus groups was conducted in Beechworth, Bright, Mitta Mitta, Mount Beauty and Omeo, with a total of 73 participants (31 women and 42 men). Discussions centred on participants’ understandings, opinions and experiences of the policy.



Residents prepare their property ahead of the fire season.

Research Findings

Generally the participants demonstrated:

- A high level of **awareness** of the policy.
- Strong **support** for the policy.
- A high level of **understanding** of ‘prepare, stay and defend’.
- **Uncertainty** of the meaning of ‘leave early’.
- A **range of factors influence** their **bushfire planning** and decision-making including confidence, work and family commitments, and responsibilities for livestock and pets.
- Despite intending to stay and defend, many retained late evacuation as a **contingency plan**.

Conclusions

- The high levels of awareness and support for the policy reflect positive experiences of staying to defending and, in a small number of cases, leaving early.
- The ‘leave early’ message is not well understood and requires clarification.
- Many of those who decided to stay and defend are consciously or unconsciously retaining late evacuation as a last-minute option.
- People’s confidence in the survivability of their house and their own physical and mental ability are fundamentally important to decision-making and successful implementation of the ‘Stay and defend or leave early’ policy.

For further information please refer to: Tibbits, A. & Whittaker, J. (In Press) ‘Stay and Defend or Leave Early: Policy problems and experiences during the 2003 Victorian Bushfires’ in *Environmental Hazards*.