# *Reflections on 'Community Response to bushfires'*

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[This contribution is part response to, part further elaboration of a previous article in NCQ 5(1) 2007 pp. 11-25 by Goodman, Healey and Boulet, based on empirical data gained from interviews with survivors of the 2005 Eyre Peninsula Bushfire, the 'Wangary Fire'. In that article we made the point that the 'community' response and the capabilities of the community to respond to the fire threat are – at least – as important as individualised, technologically 'sophisticated' and 'formal' ones. We consider this and the two next articles very much part of the 'rural, regional, remote' community development theme and we are delighted that our article has created a bit of discussion across Australia; indeed, several readers have reacted and sent short email messages or gave phone calls – generally confirming our approach. Ed.]

Throughout reading the article I was struck by the relevance of several considerations you have posed. The following comments are purely of my own and should in no way appear to reflect the opinion of any specific Emergency Fire Service.

**1)** This fire was indicative of many bushfire situations in terms of both predictable and unpredictable fire behaviour. Thus, I found it a good overall indication of 'Bushfire' as a generic term.

**2)** The categorisation of community members into types has provided me with an interesting window to view our community residents through and I felt it had effectively summarised the inherent differences of community members.

## *Formal warning systems*

**3)** The effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of formal warning systems was also similar to several 'serious' fire situations I am familiar with or have personally attended. For me, this indicates a very human and generalised response, in that we are not in the same state or community but can reflect identical responses to our own local experiences despite different environments and a higher number of 'transient' residents. I found some aspects of the findings in the paper to show a disturbing similarity to some of the anecdotal comments which have emerged from the recent (2006) Victorian fires.

- Communities have approached the initial community emergency meetings with a sense of hope and the expectation that fire services would empower and engage the community to make safe decisions.
- These expectations have been disappointed by a sense of detachment in the fire service personnel and concern that fire personnel have demonstrated an obvious dislike for any possible accountability for the advice sought by residents. This underpinning fear of accountability was seen to completely override the purpose of gathering the community for 'information' sessions.
- Residents have come away from meetings feeling confused by unclear or conflicting information. They have felt abandoned and unsupported by the very people they had assumed could be relied on at such a time.
- Communities expected that the meetings would be aimed at providing response tactics and guidance, but were more focused on imparting decisions which had already been made in 'The City' (i.e. head office) and that any 'consultation' was only for the sake of appearances. Again, I was torn between empathy and logistics.
- Many residents have spoken of the 'circus' which arrived in town, meaning the formal emergency management systems. Residents observed local brigade members appearing overwhelmed and unable to provide the commitment which is expected of them by their own local community.
- Residents described the formal emergency management systems as 'token gestures', 'nothing but PR' and that resident brigade members were simply there as 'trophies in a uniform'. I was most deeply struck by the effect this must have had on the brigade members who would be left to 'pick up the pieces' when the authorities had moved on and how this must have affected their (and their families') personal relationships with the community.
- I felt deeply torn to hear these comments, as there are enormous discrepancies between what community members wanted and/or expected, and what was ever going to be possible to provide, in terms of 'Incident control/ management'.
- An intrinsic part of becoming a volunteer firefighter is the desire to 'rescue' people in the hour of their greatest need. This creates a challenging conundrum when on instruction we cannot respond as we might, emotionally or morally, want to.
- To have observed media reports, and other sources, which have highlighted the negative feelings of residents was most disheartening. Volunteer and career firefighters bring a fundamental expression of 'good will' by signing on to do the job we do.
- The enormous volume of volunteer/career firefighters, which exists throughout Australia, demonstrates this.



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Whether by attending incidents, pursuing training, skills maintenance or just the variety of other responsibilities, we are actively engaging in our version of 'making the world a better place'.

- The risk we choose to accept, by becoming a firefighter, is considerable. The expectation that we cannot please everyone has been accepted by us as individuals. However, this does not mean that it is any less upsetting to understand how residents have felt. Again, I can only imagine how challenging this must have been for the crews who were specifically involved.

## *Informal warning systems*

**4)** The selective nature of 'informal' warning systems were also common to my own and our local experiences. I have also been interested to consider the reasons behind this behaviour and I will draw on personal and anecdotal evidence to describe my thoughts

- There are a number of social responses to 'new' community members in our area and unfortunately these 'new' residents are very much at the mercy of this behaviour. For example, older 'locals' treat newcomers with a distinct lack of trust, which extends into many areas of the 'new' residents' lives, including access to suppliers and resources, access to support mechanisms (both formal and informal) and, in many cases, access to social groups for both themselves and their children.
- New residents are often expected to 'prove' themselves by remaining/surviving independently in the area for a minimum of 10 years before they will experience the true value of 'inclusiveness' within the community. I believe that this behaviour is undermining the sense of belonging in many areas of the 'new' residents' experience within their new community.
- Relatively longstanding locals were also at the mercy of this behaviour if their social contacts were disrupted by conflict and disagreements (either as adults or between their respective children)
- Unfortunately, bushfire and other natural disasters are one of the few stimulants which both expose this behaviour and in some cases inspire the wonderful few who will literally 'come out the woodwork' to introduce themselves and offer much needed help/guidance.
- Conversely, new residents have not always listened or acted upon safety advice from 'old locals' as they are not aware of the extensive nature of a local's fire related knowledge (both in fire management and updates of the fire's progress and direction). The fact that locals do not always appear in an official outfit (i.e. police or firefighter uniforms) can seriously infringe on the new residents' surety of accurate information.
- I was most interested to observe in our extended area during the recent Victorian fires that some of these longstanding behaviours were abandoned during face-to-face contact at emergency meetings. Residents who had engaged in very longstanding family feuds were inspired to override 20 years of bickering and conflict (which had also divided the community over this time).
- When put in the same room and informed that the whole community was at immediate risk and must either evacuate or activate fire plans, the behaviour changed dramatically and offers of help to prepare properties, support to house children in safer properties and care of animals/pets was immediately forthcoming.
- I am also interested to note that throughout the 11 months which have now passed, the connections made under such traumatic circumstance have continued and to my knowledge, the previous 'feuds' have not resurfaced.

## *Expectations of emergency personnel*

**5)** The nature of being a volunteer firefighter is such that subtle but enormous expectations are placed by the community on our ability to respond to any emergency.

- I honestly see this as innate human behaviour under emergency conditions as both panic and confusion overtake the senses. Because a 'uniform' represents our earliest conditioning to seek safety, it is understandable that people will respond with an overwhelming sense of the need to be 'saved' by anyone who happens to be wearing a uniform at the time.
- Rightly or wrongly, it would be normal for people to not distinguish between volunteer or paid/career personnel at a time like that. My observations are that anyone who appears to have expertise in this area will be approached i.e. generational residents who are known to have such expertise. It is often curious to note that as a blonde 30-something woman, I am not always the person that was expected to arrive in such a uniform and may seem not to be as capable due to my appearance, despite my expertise!
- Conversely, our own expectations of ourselves, as firefighters, can also be in conflict with what we can realistically achieve. It is a profoundly frustrating process to try to reconcile what we had wanted for our immediate communities and what we were able to provide, regardless of how sensible the reasons were.
- The nature of the volunteer firefighter is such that we often have strong personal and community values and connections. It is therefore deeply challenging to reconcile the needs of the community and the formal logistical orders.
- Fortunately, the provision, by fire services, of critical incident stress management has meant that we are now much more supported to address these feelings than we have ever been before.

## *Resources and Firefighting skills*

**6)** The supply or lack thereof, of firefighting equipment is a huge factor when considering community fire safety. As with many issues which have been raised by this article, I feel this is a bigger issue that cannot be addressed by individuals alone. Of the many considerations relating to this area, I feel the following to be the most imperative.

- Individuals must have access to ongoing skills maintenance to have the maximum benefit from their equipment. Thus



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the generational residents, due to use of farm equipment are again in a stronger position. Residents are not always provided with the most appropriate equipment for their physical needs (particularly the elderly) despite significant expense involved.

- Residents' financial circumstances directly determine their ability to respond to fire, thus increasing their own risk and that of adjoining properties.
- Many residents make the purchase of fire fighting equipment under the duress of current bushfire conditions and are not therefore able to fully consider the merits of their purchase or distinguish between 'sale pitch' and realistic needs. Once again, this is not true of generational residents.

## *Suggestions*

Below, I offer suggestions from my personal viewpoint about a number of strategies that I think are worth pursuing.

## *Educational strategies*

**7)** Much of our bushfire knowledge has been accrued in sporadic and disjointed areas. This will ensure that only generational residents (and their children) are consistently safer.

- The article has highlighted the relative safety of generational residents through their 'connectedness' to the land. I would like to see this further explored to determine whether this safety is actually 'familiarity' with a particular area or if it is indeed a generic ability to 'read' any landscape, despite radical environmental/ topographical differences.
- By relying on 'information' sessions in the prelude to a fire front approaching, we are expecting 'too little, too late' to be effective. Our education strategies need to have been addressed and have already provided the cognitive responses required long before 'strike teams' will be arriving. I feel that in the prelude to the fire front, we would be more effective in utilising strategies to create goodwill and uniting individual residential groups rather than expecting to begin fire education here.
- To best address this, I believe we need to include wildfire safety in our schools as part of the safety subjects currently provided. Home fire safety is considered essential but we are not educating children in city/suburban areas of the dangers and practicalities of bush fire.
- Whether our first experience of the bush is a day trip, a holiday away or a new address, we must ensure that a basic understanding of bushfire behaviour is established.
- For example, 'move to higher ground' is appropriate for a flood response, but not always appropriate for a bushfire response. I believe that if we can incorporate fire behaviour (terrain, weather, wind direction, radio information, etc) from the early to secondary years of school, we can begin to meet the changing needs of a multicultural and diverse society.
- Our current model uses pre-fire season sessions and provides emergency sessions to communities who are in the expected path of a bushfire. Education sessions are run through local schools and specific residential groups, but again, this is random.
- The ability to make informed choices under such horrendous circumstances requires that we have innate knowledge that can still be recalled effectively when our senses are so overloaded. This will inevitably mean the need for theory-based information to be integrated into practical responses. Therefore, to revisit this knowledge and regularly practice the skills needed, it must be regularly built into all curricula.
- Documented evidence of both trained and untrained personnel/residents has repeatedly demonstrated that the ability to make 'intuitive' and 'instinctual' decisions is the most critical aspect of safe decision making under duress.
- What we must consider as educators, rescuers and community members is that the 'fight versus flight' instincts will take over at a time like this. I believe that our work lies in programming these reactions to at least better direct them.
- As the Australian environment needs to burn to maintain its own ecological health, I feel that bushfire safety is really a generic skill that all our residents (young and old) need to have. Much like First Aid, it is a skill we hope to never need, but will be eternally grateful for having should the need arise.

## *Community development strategies and implementation*

**8)** The greatest concern that emerged for me from the article was a tendency for the more vulnerable residents to 'wait for information'. Of equal concern was the fact that many of the residents were women waiting for 'the Man' to come home or 'someone' to communicate what responses were needed. As a society, I believe this should concern us, because, when that dependency is reliant on life or death outcomes, it is no longer just a sociological concern. This reality has also been reflected in anecdotal evidence from a number of fires around the country. I feel that this strongly demonstrates a need to radically change how we are approaching community information sessions. We can assume from the outcomes here and in other bushfire situations, that the strategies in place have too many discrepancies between the intended learning outcome and the final reality. I would like to see the focus of community education create solid learning outcomes and, more importantly, that the sessions are designed to create the goodwill needed to unite the whole community in the face of adversity.

- Anecdotal observations have consistently described that, without such a real and unmanageable threat, the connections between residents, would not have been formed to the depth created. While I do not feel that we should create such threats to activate community goodwill, I do feel that we can do much more to harness, nurture and consolidate these connections for long after the threat has passed. This will ensure that the next time that community faces any adversity, it will do so from a position of strength. We know as community developers, that it is easier to perpetuate goodwill than it is to re-energise it.
- Many residents have described the current format of community fire education/emergency management sessions as 'a group of men standing around seeming important'. This approach is not empowering or providing the tactical skills



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for women, in particular, to make independent decisions for themselves and their children.

- This approach perhaps also alienates any men who are at the mercy of this stand-offish behaviour and who may not have had the training to respond to expectations placed on them by their wives and children.
- We need to change our style of communication, the environment sessions are held in, and the nature of the educator, to better suit the types of conditions which women communicate in and feel empowered to actively participate in. For example, prime opportunities would include morning teas at the local playgroup, informal craft mornings, family fun days, sporting groups and community houses, local charity groups such as CWA, Red Cross etc.
- War, drought and similar experiences have shown us that women do have a determined ability to persevere through the most challenging conditions to meet the demands of a community in crisis. I feel this is reflected in the numbers of female operational members throughout the fire services, and is also reflected in a range of community leaders.
- We need to develop strategies which are 'outside the square' and move away from the traditional lines of masculine communication. Strategies need to provide both sustainable support and sustainable change. By directing our education sessions away from information dissemination and moving towards a model which generates that goodwill, we will create more positively united and effective communities.
- Nurturing 'goodwill' between fire services and the communities is of particular concern to me. I am saddened that communities have perceived the fire services in the above mentioned manner. It has not been my experience that a culture of chauvinism populates fire services, in general. In many cases, it is quite the opposite. We have a huge resource of both male and female personnel, who are naturally considerate communicators. I do not believe we would have attracted so many female volunteer firefighters, if this was not the case.
- Strategies need to be developed which harness the existing resources, personnel and processes ('from the ground up') which the community can build from. The alternative of 'inflicting' management strategies developed 'in the City' leads to mismanagement, dislocation and disempowerment of the community. Goodwill is thus diluted and a mentality of 'us versus them' is created between the community and the fire services.
- Our local area has a most impressive and highly self organised 'feeding group' which is ready to be activated within one hour of a known threat. (Many of our members are very much looking forward to the next time we can call on their services due the delicious and abundant contributions they are ready to make!)
- Most importantly, this group has regularly 'trained' to ensure its capability when truly needed. As firefighters and community members, we enjoy these 'training/skills maintenance' sessions very much! It is hard not to be humbled by the very practical nature of this 'goodwill' and it is a constant reminder of whom we 'volunteer' to protect and the interdependent nature of our relationship within the community.
- Communities who felt abandoned by the fire services have negatively united through fear and vulnerability, neither of which provides strength, confidence or capability. This has led to a profound sense of dislocation from wider society and a feeling of further isolation.
- Current education/information strategies have been seen to have woven the illusion of community participation into the structure of the program, but are undermined by a desire to avoid accountability and suppress opposition to the proposed management.
- Communities who believed that 'consultation' would be used to determine their outcomes, have been deflated and disappointed, to find out that many decisions were already made. Fires services need to be very careful about honestly explaining what has been decided and what will truly be created through real consultation. We know that a resistance to change is less likely when people are truly involved in the decision making process which they are affected by.
- I believe that, as fire service personnel, we underestimate the knowledge and capability of a community, at our own peril. By working in conjunction we have access to peripheral information which can become critical when formal systems and communication have broken down.
- I believe we have moved into a very dangerous place when 'consultation' is used as a disguise rather than a genuine interest in engaging the needs of any community, particularly when the outcomes are potentially fatal.

## *Relationship between fire personnel and the community*

**9)** In response to the role that volunteer fire personnel have in the community, I am struck by a number of conflicting considerations.

- We need to encourage the community to view 'Uniforms' as a source of safety, i.e. find a policeman if you are lost, etc. However, bushfire is a perfect example of circumstances in which people need to be able to think for themselves and respond in an independent, self directed and effective manner.
- I am unsure how we create the sense of safety and security that the public have from the presence of emergency personnel while still creating safety nets to address situations which humans (trained or not) cannot prevent, such as bushfire.
- I am compelled to return to my earlier reflection that education is our strongest tool in this area. I believe that relevant knowledge and personal confidence with such knowledge will give individuals something to act independently with.
- Recent publicity campaigns by Emergency Fire Services have begun to remind residents that we will not be able to forewarn, nor attend every home, but I have observed that this undermines a community's sense of security, lacking the knowledge to respond without us.
- Conversely, the implementation of community fireguard groups is a direction which I feel we need to pursue and which provides more resolution to the chasm which currently exists between the community and fire services, while fostering neighbourly relations.
- Fire services need to explore the type of communication which is provided to residents at such a time. We need to ensure that our fears of litigation and accountability do not override the vulnerability of communities 'at risk'.
- To ensure our own continual improvement and provide



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highest quality of response to the maximum number of residents, it is critical that we preserve and nurture these lines of communication.

- This is an area I feel we urgently need to address but at a state and federal level, rather than – either - individual brigades being responsible for community education programs (as has previously been the case) - or - state-based programs, which are non specific to local needs (e.g. coastal fire risks, mountain fire risk or suburban fringe fire risk, etc.)

## *Self reliant approach to bushfire management*

**10)** Any individual's ability to respond to wildfire is directly affected by their knowledge/skill and, to a greater extent, by the resources available to them.

- As fire does not discriminate between the financial statuses of those within its path, it is imperative that residents be supported to have access to appropriate firefighting equipment. This is currently at considerable expense to residents.
- Tenants represent a great concern to me in this area. They are often more transient and therefore need to regularly revisit their specific approach to fire in each area/premises that they move to. They are also at the mercy of landlord support to protect the dwelling they inhabit and thus themselves. To protect this group, we need to build fire management support into tenancy rights.
- For example, I am a trained firefighter, I have lived in my area for over 18 years but my landlord removed my only static water supply (water tank) prior to the start of the worst bushfire season on record for Victoria. I was not financially able to replace this and, as such, went through that season with no way to fully activate my own bushfire plan. I had the training, experience and local knowledge but resources were taken out of my control.
- I would like to see a greater role played by Government, insurance companies, banks and local building regulators as these are the institutions who will inevitably be drawn into the outcomes of a major fire.
- Governments are in a prime position to contribute to supporting the disadvantaged in rural areas, by means-testing an equipment fund. Insurance companies may, in fact, save vast amounts by supporting policy holders who need to be equipped. Banks who have outstanding mortgages on rural/semi-rural properties could also contribute to the ongoing viability of such premises by providing relevant equipment.
- Most importantly, I feel we need a complete overhaul, Council by Council, across Australia, to determine the appropriateness of allowing occupancy in obviously fire prone areas.
- These suggestions may initially prove to be expensive, but in light of the effects of global warming, we really have no other choice. The recent fires in Victoria have demonstrated the complex strategies which fire management services will need to respond to Super Fires.
- Perhaps we need to involve the community more in fire prevention tactics.
- This may also be an area where Indigenous land management education can be combined with community development outcomes.
- Current trends towards regional development must also address these concerns before launching advertising campaigns which encourage new residents to relocate. We must first ask ourselves if the infrastructure, education and community 'goodwill' can continue to sustain themselves and any newcomers.

## *Long term effect of mismanagement*

- Our area was one of the most devastated by the fire of Ash Wednesday in February 1983.
- The psychological impact of that fire is still presenting in many local residents who were residents, parents or young people/children living in the area at the time.
- The anxiety levels of these people are still a concern and the ineffectiveness of proper follow-up support has led to a variety of social and psychological outcomes.
- Support mechanisms initiated in the aftermath of serious bushfires must remain active and effective for much longer than we have previously provided. The mentality of 'others were worse off than us' has prevented the resolution of crisis impact and created a culture which felt it inappropriate to seek help or even debrief due to the extent of loss suffered overall within the community.
- Residents and families who did not loose property or livestock were not considered to be in need of counselling or support despite the experience they had survived. In many cases, they simply did not recognise the need for themselves and thus did not access support offered. In light of the shock associated with such an experience, we cannot expect residents to be able to completely self-diagnose their follow-up needs.
- Particular weather patterns are all that is needed now to stimulate old anxieties and to create a sense of vulnerability similar to that which was experienced during the actual fire. In many cases, aspects of post-traumatic stress have been integrated into daily life and have not been resolved.

## *In conclusion: what is the value of rhetoric and hindsight?*

As a woman and mother, living in the country, I was heartened to see the extent to which this article had comprehensively explored all the factors and perspectives involved in the Eyre Peninsula fire. As a firefighter, it was a familiar story. As a member of the local community, I have to wonder where all this leaves us.

Conjecture, rhetoric and bureaucratic analysis can only resolve so much. Rather, it becomes the very distraction that guarantee that communities will be no safer. The chasm which lives between our 'knowing better' and our 'being better' lies in the practical response we all take from here. To face Bushfire is an experience which can never be fully imagined and it is for this reason that our decisions must be accountable to those who have to face it, live through it and continue to grow in its aftermath.

It is my sincere hope that all who read these and other's words will stop long enough to question: how bushfire-ready are you as an individual? Which resources do you need? What can you do to protect and support your family, your community and the strangers who are all around you?



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