

Rural resilience and bushfires in East Gippsland

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RURAL RESILIENCE AND BUSHFIRES

Resilience is a measure of human welfare and capacity; an attribute of social systems that enables people – as groups and individuals – to cope with and respond positively to change. Resilience shifts over time and space and, in effect, determines the impact that particular hazards will have. Viewed in this way, disasters occur only when people who lack resilience are confronted with hazards.

What, then, constitutes bushfire resilience? Why are some communities and people therein less resilient than others? What are the links between human welfare and capacity and the ability to effectively prepare for, respond to and recover from bushfires?

This research will develop an understanding of the factors that make rural communities resilient to bushfires. In doing so, it aims to increase *community self-sufficiency for fire safety*.



THE RESEARCH

The research involves case studies of rural communities in East Gippsland that were directly affected by the 2003 Victorian bushfires. Qualitative and quantitative research methods – including document and policy analysis; focus groups; and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with community members and agency personnel – are being used to investigate:

- Factors that make rural communities resilient to bushfires;
- Ways to identify groups and individuals who lack resilience;
- Barriers to effective bushfire preparation, response and recovery;
- Ways to identify and utilise valuable ‘local knowledge’; and
- Strategic planning, policy and practical measures for increasing bushfire resilience in rural communities.

SOME EMERGING ISSUES AND THEMES

Demographic change: changing size and age structure of populations is reducing many rural communities’ capacity to cope with bushfires;

Economic diversity: communities with a mix of economic activities and opportunities are more resilient to bushfires;

Livelihood security: degree of access to and control over public and private resources is an important indicator of bushfire resilience;

Social networks: active involvement in informal networks (e.g., for emergency warnings, preparedness, etc.) greatly increases bushfire resilience;

Local participation: utilisation of ‘local knowledge’ and participation of local people in fire, emergency and land management is a vital component of community bushfire resilience.



THE PROJECT IS DEVELOPING A TOOL THAT WILL ENABLE FIRE, EMERGENCY AND LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES TO IDENTIFY GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE *LEAST RESILIENT* WHEN THREATENED BY BUSHFIRES. THE TOOL WILL AID THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND *TARGETING* OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR IMPROVED BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY.