



Community response to the February 2011 Bushfires

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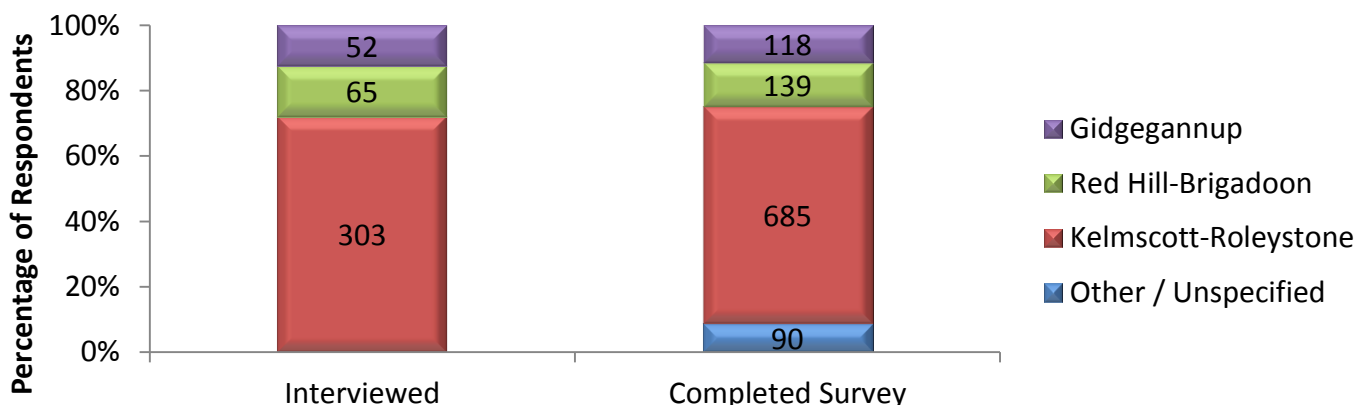
Who Are We?

We are a team of researchers from the School of Psychology at the UWA, and we were asked by FESA and the Bushfire CRC to speak to residents of the Kelmscott–Roleystone and Red Hill–Brigadoon areas affected by the February 2011 fires. From February to April you may have noticed our team of researchers speaking to residents of the fire-affected areas and areas nearby. We were interested in learning about residents' experiences during the bushfire and in order to do so we spent some time in your community, knocking on residents' doors and asking them some questions about the fire. We hope to use what we learn from residents to develop ways of improving community outcomes when facing bushfire threats.

Who Participated in the Project?

Ideally, we would have liked to have spoken to every resident who was affected by the fire but, as you can imagine, doing so would have been a huge job. In the six weeks we spent in Kelmscott, Roleystone, Red Hill, Herne Hill, Millendon, Baskerville, Brigadoon, and Gidgegannup, we were able to approach over 1400 households and interview a total of 425 people. In addition, we also sent out a survey to a random selection of residents in these areas. Again, it was not possible to send a survey to all residents, but from the 3000 we did send out, we were very happy to receive over 1000 responses. The chart below shows a breakdown of the responses from each area we visited.

Number of Interviewees and Survey Responses from the Study Areas



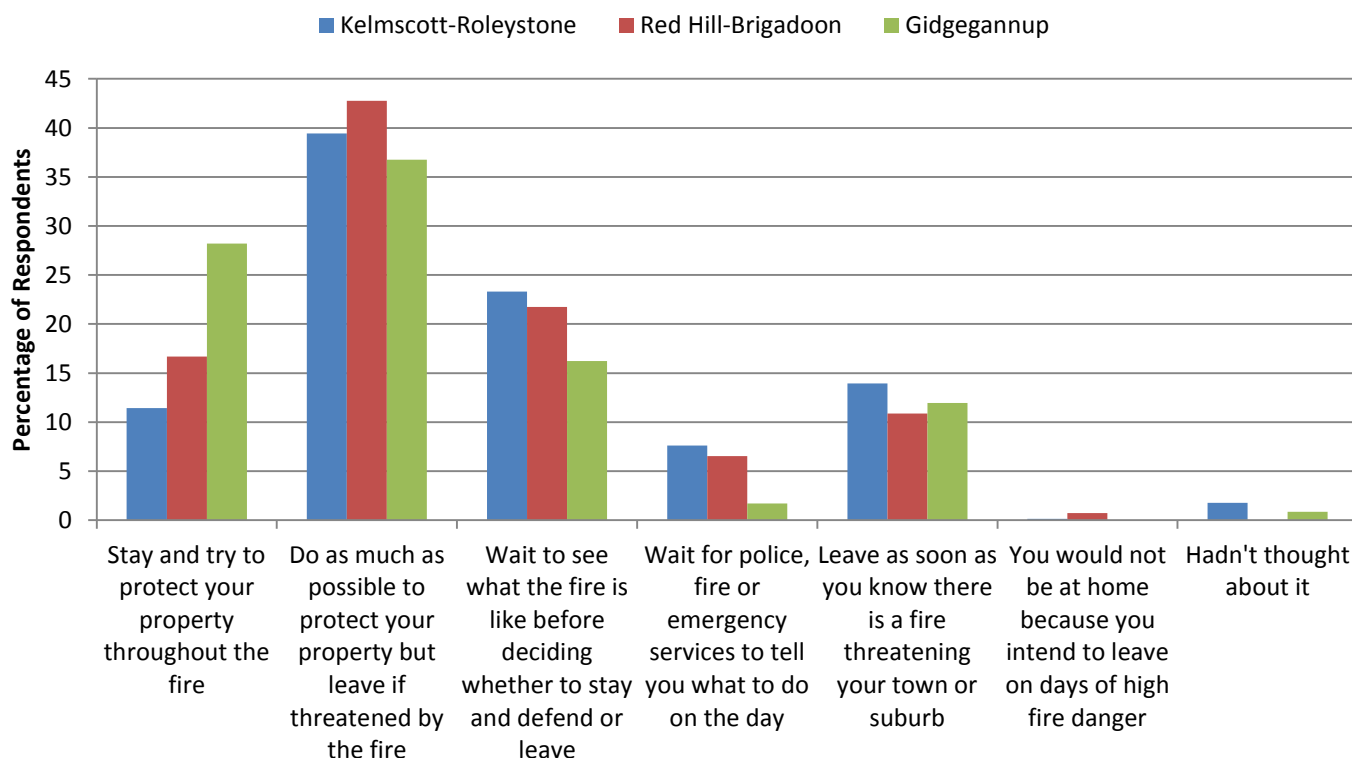
Put together, this has been the single largest research project involving bushfire-affected community members in the State's history. Our researchers were made to feel very welcome by the residents and we would like to thank everybody for being so supportive. For those of you who weren't able to participate but would have liked to, we will be conducting more research in your area in the near future and we would very much like for you to become involved in that (please see the last page of this report for details on how to do this). We will now turn to an overview of some of the important things we learned from our time in the community.

Planning for a Bushfire

Less than 10 percent of Kelmscott–Roleystone residents reported that they had planned to stay and defend their homes in the event of a fire, whereas over 30 percent had planned for whole family to leave their home very early on. Residents in Red Hill–Brigadoon areas were much less inclined to plan to evacuate the whole household, though this may be due to concerns around preserving livestock. Approximately one-half of all residents indicated that they either had no plan or that they wanted to wait and see how bad a fire was before taking any action. This result is quite concerning as the investigation into the Victorian bushfires of 2009 revealed that many bushfire related deaths occur after last-minute changes in plan.

Residents engaged in a number of preparatory actions in both the lead up and on the day of the fire including actions such as clearing gutters, discussing the risk with neighbours/locals as well as having independent power and water supplies, protective clothing, mapping out a fire plan/evacuation route. Generally speaking, residents in the more rural areas of Red Hill–Brigadoon and Gidgegannup had taken more preparatory steps than those within the urbanised Kelmscott–Roleystone areas. The most cited source of information used by residents for their bushfire preparation in the mail-out survey was the Prepare. Act. Survive. guide sent out by FESA, although many residents also reported using ‘common sense’ and their experience living in a rural community as a guide in informing their bushfire preparation.

Most likely action if bushfire occurred in town/suburb



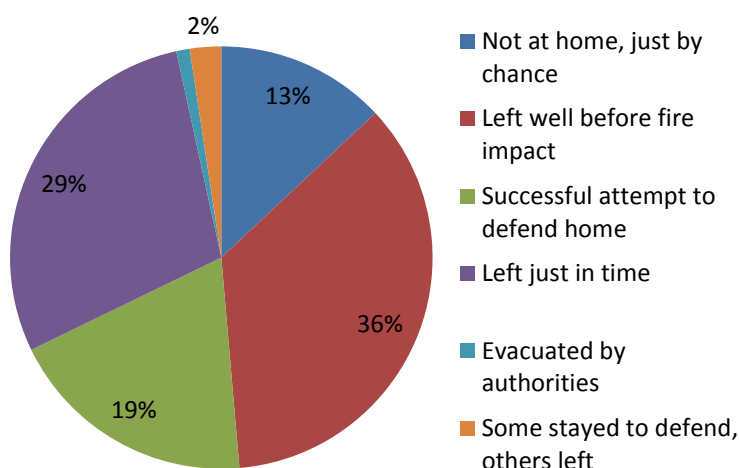
Residents did identify some factors that made it more difficult for them to prepare their home for bushfires. Many residents reported that they could not afford to buy the equipment they needed or that they did not have the experience or knowledge to use the equipment effectively. Others found it difficult to overcome some of the bureaucracy associated with conducting controlled burns. Many residents had intended to be more prepared but acknowledged that they had become complacent, rationalising that a bushfire would never happen.

Experience on the Day of the Fire

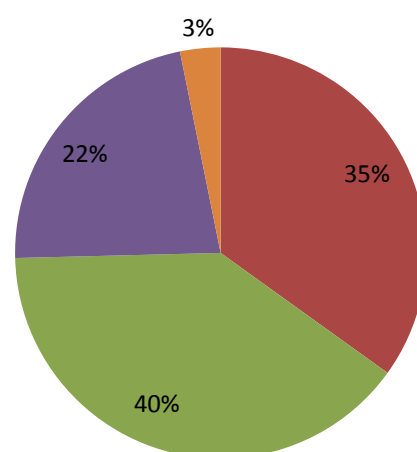
For most residents in the Kelmscott–Roleystone area, seeing smoke was the first warning sign that a fire was threatening the area. Upon learning about the fire, about 33% of the interviewed residents decided to leave their homes quickly, well before the fire impacted their homes. Though 19% of the interviewed residents in this area were able to successfully defend their homes against the fire, 28 percent reported that they left their homes only *just* in time.

Experiences for residents in the Red Hill–Brigadoon areas were quite different from those in the Kelmscott–Roleystone area. In the Red Hill–Brigadoon area many first learned about the fire either because they could smell smoke or because a friend, family member, or neighbour contacted them to alert them. Of the 63 residents interviewed in this area, 35% decided to leave their properties well before there was chance of it being fire affected whereas 40% were able to successfully defend their home. Still, 22% reported that they had left their properties only just in time.

Kelmscott–Roleystone



Red Hill–Brigadoon

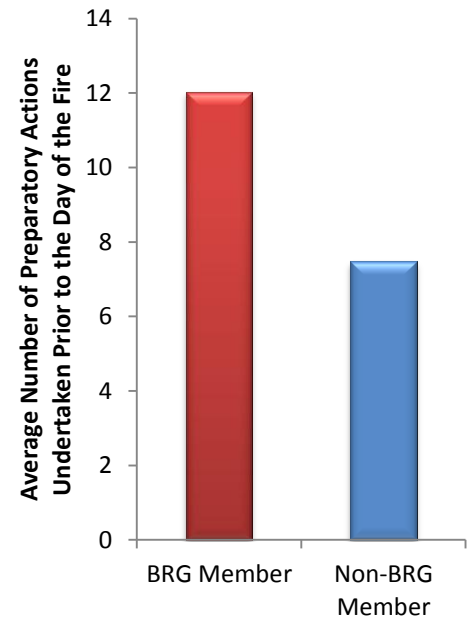


After learning about the fire, residents typically started searching for more information about the fire. In most cases, people switched the radio on, telephoned friends, neighbours, or family, and/or gathered up their valuables to take to safety. Many residents from Red Hill–Brigadoon and Gidgegannup also consulted the FESA website for more information. Approximately half of the residents in the Kelmscott–Roleystone and Red Hill–Brigadoon areas activated their home fire defences (i.e. sprinklers and generators). Of those who decided to leave their home at the last minute, many residents seemed to be waiting for emergency services personnel to tell them to evacuate. Further, approximately 60% of those interviewed reported that they expected to receive some sort of official warning about the fire.

Bushfire Ready Groups

Bushfire Ready is a community driven program established by FESA in collaboration with local government to increase the resilience of the community to bushfire risk. It is a local community action program aimed at encouraging local residents to work together in preparing and protecting their families and properties against bushfires. It aims to build the community resilience by providing an opportunity for neighbours to network, share ideas and information, and develop and implement strategies to reduce their bushfire risk.

Approximately 5-10 percent of the residents in the Kelmscott–Roleystone and Red Hill–Brigadoon areas indicated that they had been part of a Bushfire Ready group. In Gidgegannup almost one-quarter of the residents were members. Membership in a Bushfire Ready group seems to have a meaningful impact on residents' ability to respond to a bushfire, with Bushfire Ready Group members reporting that they had taken many more preparatory actions prior to the bushfire (see chart opposite).



More information about Bushfire Ready groups can be found at the following website:

<http://www.fesa.wa.gov.au/safetyinformation/fire/bushfire/pages/bushfirereadysgroups.aspx>

Response from FESA

FESA recognises the important role the community play in their own safety before, during and after a bushfire. FESA are keen to improve the resilience of the community by better understanding how the community do this and how FESA can better support the community to prepare for bushfire.

FESA commissioned the University of Western Australia through the Bushfire CRC to ensure that the community's experience of the Hills Bushfire was captured and lessons were learnt from the devastating events.

The lessons learnt are already being integrated within FESA's bushfire management and community education and engagement programs. FESA will continue to work with the University of Western Australia to further understand how to improve the community's resilience to bushfire.

Would you like to know more?

The findings from this research project have been submitted to FESA and will be used to guide their policy-making in the future. This report provides a snapshot of the findings from this research project. The full report will be available from the Bushfire CRC website at:

http://www.bushfirecrc.com/perthhillsfires_report

Future Research into Community Bushfire Safety

The University has secured funding for three years of additional research into community bushfire safety and we plan to conduct some of this research in your area. Many people have already told us that they would like to be involved in our research. If you are interested in getting involved too, please visit our website: <http://www.psychology.uwa.edu.au/research/bushfire/contactus> which also contains more information about our projects and our research team. Alternatively, please call 08 6488 7493 and leave a message.