

Delivery and acceptance of “Stay or Go” messages in the Blue Mountains

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The Rural Fire Service (RFS) is the primary bushfire combat agency in New South Wales, Australia, with 2100 brigades, 69,300 volunteers and 600 staff. The RFS provides emergency fire and other incident cover to 95% of New South Wales.

The Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, covers 1,433,000 hectares and is one of the most bushfire-prone areas of the world. 95% of residential development is along ridge-tops, within the World Heritage listed Blue Mountains National Park.

The Blue Mountains RFS district stretches 100km from Glenbrook in the east to Mt Wilson in the north. There are 20,000 ‘wildland urban interface’ properties along 800 kms of interface. Twenty six villages are located along spine ridges above steep valleys.

Major fire events occur frequently, with most large-scale fires occurring in November and December. 4 times since 1951, a single fire has destroyed more than 50 properties - mainly houses, but including churches, a school and several shops.

Damage to urban areas has occurred on 19 blow-up days within 11 major fire seasons. Most properties destroyed were in localities adjacent to northwest-oriented valleys. Fourteen deaths have occurred as a result of wildfires since 1945.

The RFS is a volunteer firefighting force. In the Blue Mountains RFS there are 26 Brigades, 65 appliances and 1200 firefighters. Volunteers manage most fires, and volunteers always are part of the Incident Management Team for major fires.

The challenge for the Community Education Team and Brigades is to reconcile the enormous scale of the ‘bushfire problem’ in the Blue Mountains. Thus, the Blue Mountains RFS has created the innovative *FireWise Blue Mountains* project has the objective to Minimal death and injury and property losses through a bushfire aware and self sufficient community.

While the *FireWise* project has used a range of community engagements, there has been a focus on street meetings. Street meetings have been popular as they are held where residents are comfortable (their street). Again, delivery has been by a volunteer community safety force.

Key messages are consistent, however content and style is adaptable to the resident participants as well as the volunteer presenters. Residents need to be convinced of things such as that they are not going to fry, and that houses do not explode. Graphic descriptions and pictures are used, and experiences of peers are drawn on – rather than war stories from firefighters.

In preparing to stay, or preparing to go, residents are provided options. There are many different strategies, and no one way suits everyone. Support is provided for making a bushfire plan. Sharing 'decisions' with family and neighbours is encouraged.

In addition to street meetings, the range of engagements has included community meetings before, during and after fires; participating at events and celebrations; site visits and assessments; and action programs such as Static Water Source markings.

Successful programs and ideas from other fire agencies are adapted and adopted, as are locally developed programs. This tailoring of programs is to suit local communities and situations. Examples include comprehensive property audits, formation of neighbourhood groups, conducting post-fire community debriefs, using firestations as election polling booths, creating 'resident friends' lists, holding "Open Day" away from the fire station and making it a community event, and community participation at hazard reductions.

Anecdotally, there were examples of community education 'successes' that resulted in desired changes in behaviour. However strong validation was required, not just to argue for program funds, but probably more importantly, to justify the volunteer hours spent on the *FireWise* program.

Research initiatives were driven by volunteers and individuals, and supported by RFS staff and managers. Collaborations continue with University of Western Sydney, RMIT University, and the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre.

As an outcome of that continuing research and analysis, there have been changes to how *FireWise* messages are delivered. Engagements are interactive and inclusive, and link the desired behaviour with the audience needs and motivations. Engagements must have a purpose eg Open Days are about the community, not the RFS.

Alarmingly, 30% of *FireWise* participants still intend to take risky decisions, such as leaving late if the fire gets too bad. More work certainly needs to be done to ensure residents are making informed decisions, and acting appropriately as a consequence.

The nature of fire fighting in Australia is that residents will be around in wildland urban interface fire situations. Fire agencies encourage able bodied adult residents to defend a well-prepared property, and such decisions to stay are accepted by the community, as is a decision to go early.

The operational benefits for fire managers for having residents in place include residents participating in decision making and actions that affect them or their assets, and residents tend to own the problem and consequences. Residents also provide local 'intelligence' about assets and people, and can bring additional resources.