The Australian 'Stay or Go' Approach: Factors Influencing Householder Decisions

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Introduction

The 'Stay and Defend or Leave Early' (hereafter referred to as 'stay or go') position (AFAC, 2005) advocates that people living in wildfire prone areas should decide how they will respond to the threat of wildfire. It does not advocate that one option is better or preferred but instead encourages people to consider their situation and circumstances and make an informed choice well before the occurrence of a wildfire. The adoption of an appropriate response by people threatened by wildfire depends on recognising the risk, accepting their responsibility, understanding their options and effectively planning and implementing the recommended actions. In this sense a person's response is considered to result from a decision making process that will be influenced by a range of individual, situational and social factors. While there is increasing evidence that the 'stay or go' is based on good evidence about the nature of the threat and effective response, recent research highlights that its effective implementation depends on the public's understanding, willingness and capacity to implement it. This paper outlines some of the findings of research identifying the factors that influence how people understand the 'stay or go' advice and how they respond to the wildfire threat.

Methods

Several large scale surveys of householders affected by major fires were conducted in various Australian states (Sydney, New South Wales 2002, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia 2005, Victoria, 2005, 2006 and 2007). Sample sizes ranged from 350 to 800 and used both mailed and telephone administered questionnaires. In addition, several studies using semi-structured interviews have been conducted with householders affected by several of these major fires. The results presented in this paper represent some of the findings of these various studies.

Results

Recognition of the threat

If people are to implement an effective response they need to recognise that there is a threat and that some response is necessary. Several of the studies have highlighted the differences in the recognition of threat during different wildfire events. Factors which may influence the variation in the recognition of the threat include the general level of understanding of the wildfire risk, the nature of the fire event and the extent and nature of warnings issued.

Preparedness

Effective implementation of 'stay or go' depends on effective preparedness. Most commonly this is understood to mean preparation of the house and property in order to enable effective protection. However effective response depends on more than physical preparation and the concept of 'preparedness' is used to encompass four key dimensions: physical preparation, personal protection, planning and psychological preparedness. The studies have identified that there is considerable variation in the level of each of these dimensions both within and between study areas. Some of the more important findings from these studies include:

- Most householders undertake 'easy to do' preparation, often for reasons other than wildfire protection;
- Effective house and property preparation is a long term outcome and, if it increases over time, is done incrementally;

- Personal protection in the form of protective clothing and other resources is more likely to be taken once a fire occurs rather than in advance;
- Household planning is a complex decision making process that is often limited in scope; and
- Many people are unprepared for the experience of wildfire and the psychological impact.

Collectively these findings mean that many households have an inappropriate level of preparedness to ensure an effective response as recommended in the 'stay or go' position.

Outcome expectations

People tend to see 'staying to defend' as effective in protecting property but risky to life but perceive 'leaving early' as protecting life but ineffective in protecting property. They also see the option of 'waiting but leaving when threatened' as an 'in between' strategy that increases the chances of achieving both outcomes of property protection and life safety. They perceive 'staying' as the most costly option in terms of finances and effort, 'leaving early' as least costly and 'waiting' as less costly compared with 'staying', but more costly than 'leaving early. These results suggest that the most dangerous option is seen by some people as the most effective choice in terms of outcomes and costs. The results highlight the need to educate people about the benefits and costs of different ways of responding to wildfire.

Intended and actual response

There is considerable variation both within and between communities in terms of how people intend to respond during a wildfire. The majority indicate they intend to stay and defend with relatively few people indicating they will leave early. A significant minority in all studies (11-23%) intended to wait until told what to do, and 17-32% intended to wait but leave if they felt threatened. One study examining what people actually did suggests that most people who intended to adopt recommended actions actually carried out this intention. However those who intended to 'wait and see' tended to either actually stay, or to leave when the fire threatened their property. These results highlight the variability in what people intend to do and also suggest that intention strength may be an important factor influencing action during a fire. These results also highlight the relationship between preparedness and response in that people who change their mind and actually stay may not be adequately prepared to deal with the fire threat.

Complexity and Uncertainty

The 'stay or go' position recommends particular responses which, based on available evidence, are more likely to achieve safety outcomes. However, case studies reveal that fire events create particular circumstances that interact with a multiplicity of factors influencing people's response. Decision-making and response reflect complex processes that involve instinctive drives, emotional/affective factors as well as more cognitive processes. This complexity means that the outcomes are only in part likely to reflect the influence of recommended actions. Much of the complexity and uncertainty inherent in fire events and human response is beyond the influence of all but the most individualised and specific interventions. Whilst the evidence continues to support the recommendations of the 'stay or go' position, the challenges in achieving effective implementation are only emerging.

References

AFAC. (2005). *Position Paper on Bushfires and Community Safety*. **Retrieved 20 March, 2006, from**
http://www.afac.com.au/awsv2/publications/documents/PositionPaperonBushfiresandCommunitySafety.pdf