## COMMUNITY SAFETY PARADIGM
### By John Mealia - 2008

### INTRODUCTION

Bushfires have been part of the Australian environment for tens of thousands of years. Over recent years we have seen a significant change in population demographics as people seek to improve their life style. This has led to the tree and sea change phenomena currently occurring across Australia. This shift has seen expanding regional cities and life style related choices increasing the number of people living on the urban-rural interface and along the bushfire prone coast.

Bushfires constitute a major natural and socio-economic hazard, costing Australia, in excess of 80 million dollars per year and effecting around 3 million hectares of land in southern Australia alone during 2006/07. In an average year around 29 million hectares of Australia are burnt by bushfires. With seasonal fluctuations however, this area can vary four times greater or less than this average, (Bushfire Cooperative Research 2007).

Whilst the loss of life from bushfire has remained low over recent years, we need only reflect back to Ash Wednesday to remind ourselves of the potential catastrophic results Mother Nature can inflict upon the environment and communities.

On the 16th February 1983, over 100 fires started sweeping across Victoria and South Australia and killing 75 people and causing widespread damage.

Prior to Ash Wednesday, most of Victoria had experienced a drought lasting ten months. Rainfall over winter and spring was very low, and summer rainfall for Victoria was up to 75% less then in previous years. Low rainfalls meant there was little moisture in the soil and water supplies in many places was almost dry (DSE 2006).

In more recent times, many parts of Victoria have suffered sever rainfall deficiencies at some point in time, with certain areas affected as early as 1996 (EPA 2007). These severe rainfall deficiencies are having a cumulative effect by allowing forests that are traditionally wet all year around, to dry out to a point where they will ignite and burn violently under extreme fire weather conditions.

**Whilst Australia is considered one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world, in the past, bushfires as severe as Ash Wednesday were considered to occur six to ten times a century (DSE 2006). The effects of climate change however have seen similar conditions to those leading up to Ash Wednesday occur on much more regular basis.  Ash Wednesday was categorised as 1:45 year bushfire event. Latest climate change predictions include that Ash Wednesday bushfire conditions may become less than a 1:5-year occurrence. (DSE 2006).**

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Emergency Services Commissioner, Bruce Esplin, during a media conference made the comment; *'that days of extreme fire risk forecast are to increase between 25 to 50 per cent by 2050'*. (The Age, 2007).

These reoccurring severe bushfire conditions, when combined with the tree and sea change phenomena over the past several years, have significantly increased the number of communities at risk and the infrastructure which services those communities, in comparison to 1983.

The Chief Executive of the CFA, Neil Bibby, during the same media conference attended by Mr. Esplin said that; '*population shifts to the Surf Coast, Macedon and the Dandenongs has put large numbers of people and homes into bushfire areas. … Add the demographic changes with tree change and sea change and you will see that we have the potential there to have a disaster which is significantly like Canberra'* (The Age, 2007).

History is considered a very useful means for predicting the future. If we look back at the damage to the then rural townships of Upper Beaconsfield and Belgrave Heights during Ash Wednesday, we get an insight into the potential consequences of at-risk communities today within Victoria, i.e. over a period of several hours, there was 21 fatalities, 13 of them volunteer firefighters, 9,200 hectares burnt, 238 houses and other buildings destroyed and 97 cattle and sheep were lost (CFA 2006).

This article contends that to avoid similar or greater losses from the effects of climate change, fire services and government agencies need to place greater emphasis and invest more time and money to speed up the shift towards a *'community safety paradigm'*.  Characteristics of this paradigm include 'protecting those at risk' and securing sustainable reductions in the source of danger and the fear of it, all based on multi-agency and community partnerships (Squires, 1997).

**CURRENT FIRE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES**

A long-standing challenge for local and state government agencies and fire services is agreeing on the most effective method of preventing and preparing for the spread of bushfire and minimising its impact on the community.

We need only look back at the 7 most recent commonwealth and state government reports listed below and examine their recommendations, discussions and findings against what has and is yet to be implemented or achieved to form the view that there is reluctance for change.

Whilst the reports have different scopes and purposes and therefore reflect different view points, one looking at natural disasters at a national level, one was an audit of prevention and preparedness measures within Victoria, and the others were post fire reviews of different geographical areas, collectively they provided an evolving view and clarification of the need for a community safety approach to bushfires in Australia. These reports include:

- *A Nation Charred: Report on the inquiry into bushfires* – an Australian Government House of Representatives inquiry following the 2002-2003 bushfires.

- *Fire Prevention and Preparedness 2003* – an audit undertaken by the Auditor General of Victoria.
- *Inquiry into the operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT* – commissioned by the Australian Capital Territory Government.
- *National Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* – a 2004 report to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that included bushfires as one of several types of natural disasters.
- *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* – a2004 report to the COAG following 2002-2003 bushfires.
- *Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires* – commissioned by the Victorian Government from the state Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner.
- *CFA Municipal Fire Prevention Planning, Best Practice Review Report, 2002.*

Each of these reports provides detail of the lessons learnt and helps identify what changes need to occur to existing approaches and policies to emergency management.

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the extent to which policy directions are reflected in current practices, or the extent to which recommendations have been adopted and implemented. However, this article does draw on the discussions and findings from other research which provides relevant views and opinions around the community safety paradigm which supports the direction of these reports recommendations and gives an insight into what has been achieved and what has not.

Below is a summary of the broad themes that were evident from the reports under the headings of Community Safety and Policy Development and Planning:

**Community Safety**

- Supporting community safety requires a risk management approach;
- People and communities are different in terms of risk, assets, and capacities;
- Emergency services and government agencies need to better understand people and their communities;
- Community safety in bushfires is a shared responsibility between individuals, communities, agencies and local governments;
- Individuals are responsible for taking action to mitigate their own bushfire risks,
- Need to plan locally at the community level to mitigate risks, i.e. household planning to stay and defend their property or leave early;
- Building and using knowledge through research, monitoring, evaluation and improved information management.

**Policy Development and Planning (Victoria only)**

- Councils need to ensure consistent approaches to planning for fire prevention and protection.
- State government needs to review existing legislation for utilities operating within Victoria to ensure their involvement in fire preparedness and planning.
- Amendments to CFA Act are required to replace the current municipal fire prevention planning process and the requirements for a municipal fire prevention committee with a new planning process and committee that brings together all stakeholders with an involvement in fire management for both private and public land.
- The Victorian Emergency Management Council establishes a sub-committee by June 2004 to ensure an all-agency and appropriate industries' policy framework is developed and agreed in respect to the planning for fire prevention, mitigation and suppression.
- Key stakeholders in fire prevention, including Department of Sustainability (DSE), CFA, local government and Office of Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC) need to work together to develop mechanisms that support broader cooperation in fire prevention and preparedness."
- The revised CFA Municipal Fire Prevention Planning Guidelines needs to have an increased focus on integration of business plans across all agencies responsible for fire management.
- Clear policies, which detail the integration of planning process need to be developed.

One consistent theme coming from these reports is the need for a cultural shift to occur from traditional thinking which is operational focus, based on a generally top-down management style approach using a ridged structure that is centralised and hierarchical, (Buckle 2001) to one that seeks to embrace new concepts, programs and theoretical frameworks designed around achieving more effective fuel management, planning for asset protection, and community engagement.

These themes have been identified because of their relevance to local and regional fire management planning processes and strategies. They allow for analysis of what has been implemented and what has not.

Based on my own experience and observations, I have found the shift to adopting an integrated approach to fire management has been slow and cumbersome, particularly at the state and regional level.

I continually see examples where there is no rationale behind the fire management strategies, except that they have always been listed on Municipal Fire Prevention and Emergency Management Plans and therefore fail to be strategic, integrated and based on best practice approach to bushfire management.

This lack of policy direction and planning raises the concern that maximum benefits are not being derived from municipal and fire service resources and funding currently allocated to bushfire management in the areas of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Conjecture, rhetoric and bureaucratic analysis can only achieve so much. It limits fire services and government agencies capacity for change by marginalising or dismissing the underpinning logic and reasoning behind what contributes to making communities safer. It is this very distraction that in fact guarantees individual and communities will continue to be at risk.

## COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING THROUGH VOLUNTEERISM ACHIEVES COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY REDUCTION.

Traditionally, emergency service's fundamental role is the protection of life, property and the environment. Fire services, particularly those with a significant bushfire risk, have adopted a policy of building self aware and self-reliant communities who are able to recognise and understand risk and are prepared to protect themselves and their property from the threat of bushfire within the natural risk environments through education.

This shift in policy is due to the fact that during major bushfire events, fire services have accepted they do not have the resources and capacity to protect every person and every property under threat. In practical terms, this policy has resulted in a significant number of community education programs being developed and regularly delivered through various delivery methods. Whilst community education is an important part of the process to achieve community resilience and vulnerability reduction, it has limited application and therefore should only be considered as one component of the '*community safety paradigm'*.

Another key component is community strengthening. The Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) formally known as the Department of Victorian Communities (DVC) defines strong communities as 'those endowed with social, economic and environmental assets and organisational structures that work towards their sustainable use and equitable distribution', (DVC 2004c). Based on this definition, community strengthening is achieved when communities are built by community members who are engaged, participate, feel capable of working through problems and are supported by strong networks (Lin 2001; Gilchrist 2004; DVC 2004c).

The next key component to achieving strong networks is volunteerism. 'Volunteerism' is defined *"as a strategy to build active, confident and resilient communities in Australia"*, (Volunteering Australia 2005).

It is widely accepted that Volunteerism in the emergency management context contributes to the ongoing community building – it promotes community self reliance, reduces community dependence on governments, and increases the skills base of individual volunteers and of the community, (Gledhill, 2001).

Volunteerism also provides a mechanism for people to participate in identifying and understanding hazards and risks which can make them vulnerable. As people participate they develop social and organisational connections and relationships. This in turn leads to the development of community networks (DVC, 2004c). These networks provide the social

infrastructure and connectedness required to understand risks and vulnerability and therefore develop and implement a fully integrated and whole of community emergency management plan including bushfire risk identification and mitigation.

## COMMUNITY SAFETY PARADIGM

If emergency services and government agencies are to move forward, they need to genuinely accept the need for meaningful change and commit to a broader community safety model which is holistic and integrated. This will require having a policy and planning framework which supports the key recommendations from the various government inquiries and research whilst supporting the adoption of concepts and principles of community strengthening and volunteerism.

To assist in building a community safety model, this article looks at the approach taken by CFA Barwon Corangamite Area (BCA) who are committed to making the *'community safety paradigm'* shift.

BCA is located south-west of Melbourne and encompasses six municipalities; Corangamite Shire, Colac Otway Shire, Golden Plains Shire, Surf Coast Shire, Borough of Queenscliffe and City of Greater Geelong, covering an area of approximately 13,200 km$^2$ with a population of 251,145 (2001 ABS census) in 2001.

The BCA takes in many townships including Port Campbell to the west, Vite Vite North and Meredith to the north, Little River, Geelong, the Bellarine Peninsula, Torquay and Lorne to the east, the Otway Ranges to the south-east and Apollo Bay and Cape Otway to the south

Each of the municipalities have serious bushfire risks including the Otway and Brisbane Ranges, the coastal landscape along the Great Ocean Road and many isolated townships are surrounded by grass and bushlands.

The proposed BCA community safety model is based on 6 strategic themes and supports the hypothesis that by fully integrating emergency management and local government policy development with community capacity building and strengthening, an alliance will be created which will achieve risk reduction and effective management of disasters at the local community and municipal level. The model also contents that an important part of community strengthening is volunteerism.

## SIX STRATEGIC THEMES

### 1.    Risk Based Planning

The risk management process includes establishing the context, identifying risks, assessing risks through analysis and evaluation, and treating risks. Risk management requires relevant data and information to inform strategies to reduce the likelihood of bushfire and to minimise consequences when bushfires do occur through the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery continuum. Community awareness, engagement and education are recognised as

essential elements in bushfire risk management. Household planning to stay and defend or leave early is one example of a principle of risk management at a house hold level.

By applying the principles of risk management, identifying and prioritising risks becomes an inclusive process that can involve a partnership between fires services, local and state government agencies and communities. The process must allow for local available knowledge and evidence to be drawn upon and take into account the fact that priorities differ between and within communities. This is a critical mechanism for developing and supporting partnerships and shared decision making about risks and priorities for action at the municipal and local level.

One example of risk based planning has been achieved by City of Greater Geelong in partnership with CFA, other emergency services and government agencies by developing an Integrated Fire Management Plan using the principles of risk management and meeting the objectives of the Victorian Government, Integrated Fire Management Planning project which is a direct outcome of the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires Inquiry by Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner.

The plan is based on an agreed methodology for involving the community in planning decisions and working with communities to achieve self reliance, resilience and sustainability in partnership with fire management and other Government agencies.

This project identified, assessed community risks and charted the planned and co-ordinated implementation of measures designed to minimise the occurrence, and mitigate the effect, of bushfire, grassfires, residential and industrial fires on the community. The plan and planning process will hopefully be made available to the community through an interactive web site which will allow the community to look at their risks, the mitigation strategies developed through the planning and development process and allow feed back and input to the municipality to achieve a fully interactive engagement process between the community, Municipality and fire management agencies. The plan can be viewed on the City of Greater Geelong Website.

**2.      Risk Partnering with the Community**

Working in partnership with communities to manage risk has traditionally been focussed around the delivery of the Community Education Programs. Overall, these programs have been designed to create self-reliant communities by engaging with individuals in groups, providing information and in turn developing a greater understanding of individuals at risk. Generating a shared understanding of the issues and developing a shared responsibility is the underpinning philosophy needed to broaden this approach by been more inclusive to achieve self reliant, sustainable and resilient communities.

A new program using this philosophy is been trailed in BCA and is based on a joint Surfcoast Shire and CFA research initiative which looks at the risks to the tourism sector from bushfire.

The bushfire tourism initiative provides an example of a more innovative and inclusive application of delivery. It has created a partnership between CFA, Surfcoast Shire, Colac Otway Shire,

Geelong Otway Tourism, Department of Human Services, Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Parks Victoria and tourist operators.

Its aim is to ensure tourist operators are well informed about bushfire safety and are able to play an active role in mitigating their risks. Through a modified version of CFA's Community Fire Guard program, it seeks to achieve a shared understanding and responsibility for bushfire risks specific to the tourism sector through facilitated group workshops. This approach works towards building capacity of tourist operators and their employees to engage and educate their customers on bushfire safety. By fire services and government agencies working together with tourist operators, a number of education tools have been designed and developed for holiday makers visiting country Victoria, they include; bushfire safety tourism DVD for every accommodation unit/room, bushfire safety audio CD for travailing tourists, and various bushfire safety brochures.

A second key aspect of self reliant tourist operators is for them to have an environment which is safe and protects their customers and business from the threat and impact of fire. To achieve this, emergency management guidelines have been developed to provide tourist operators with the tools and processes to prepare their property, respond to and recover from a bushfire whilst helping them to meet their legal obligations and duty of care to their customers.

### 3.    Volunteerism/participation

BCA is undertaking research in partnership with RMIT, Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) to ensure BCA remains informed of what it is that enables or constrains people participation in volunteer activities.  Using the philosophy that by working more broadly with the community, BCA will be better placed to understand the range of issues that exist across the community. Limiting the work that emergency service does for the community and its networks means that we can only ever be reactive to a declining volunteer base. By supporting the development of a culture that is inclusive, that engages with and understands the broader community, BCA hopes to position itself to achieve the best that it can for the safety and wellbeing of the community.

The research includes development of a CFA Participation Strategy. This will involve qualitative research to highlight the range of issues that constrain and enable voluntary activity. The Learning's will be analysed and applied to support volunteer brigade and community sustainability. Volunteer participation is recognised as a key strength in building capacity of communities and their local emergency services.

### 4.    Capacity Building

Through implementing community capacity building initiatives such as Community Fire Guard and Bushfire Tourism Initiative, BCA is contributing to the broader community strengthening agenda. Through partnerships with other agencies, BCA is exploring how CFA contribute to the broader community safety agenda and to position communities to be better placed to understand

and mitigate their risks. There are a number of initiatives under way to build capacity and explore the notion that local community bushfire planning is a bottom-up approach that supports the development of local solutions to local problems taking into account social and physical resources available in the community.

A key one comes from the Victorian Government Initiative known as Community Building Initiative (CBI) and is managed by the DPCD. BCA is supporting this initiative by accepting the role of fund manager and employer for the Lorne Community Building Initiative. This provides one example of what is achievable through emergency services support to broader community strengthening initiatives.

Lorne is a costal township located about 60km south west of Geelong along the Great Ocean Road and has a significant summer population at great risk from bushfire and suffered significant loses during Ash Wednesday. Those losses include 3 lives, 729 houses destroyed and 41,000 hectares burnt. Since 1983, Lorne has undergone significant growth and development and provides an excellent example of the sea change phenomena.

BCA are actively supporting the development of a range of community projects which has allowed us to enhance our understanding of the Lorne community. Through this initiative, perception of CFA is changing and will impact directly on the local brigade viability. As the community begins to perceive the CFA more broadly, the appeal of the CFA to the community broadens and encourages volunteerism and interest in bushfire and other community risks.

There are 8 community projects underway which were identified during two community opportunity workshops facilitated by CFA and DPCD, they include:
1. Creative Volunteering - Reviving the community
2. Wellsprings - Wellbeing Gathering Nurturing Wellbeing
3. Lorne Arts - Bringing the Arts together
4. Affordable Housing - Exploring Housing Diversity
5. Lorne Aquatic Project (LAP) - Meeting Aquatic Needs
6. Pier & Point Grey - Understanding the Pier Precinct
7. Plastic Bag Free Lorne - Renewing: Reduce, Recycle, Respect
8. Residents Kit - Communicating Networks

While none of these projects represent traditional fire service business, they all contribute to building a stronger and more cohesive and inclusive community. Participation is the key to community wellbeing, by providing a range of opportunities for participation BCA is able to actively promote community wellbeing and BCA involvement in these projects challenges community perception of CFA and other emergency services. The knowledge gained through working with the community on their issues will inform BCA recruitment for volunteers and support the viability of the local brigade.

**5.     Climate Change, Environmental Conservation and Fire Management**

As the environment takes an increasingly prominent position in political debate, fire services will need to consider a longer term strategy to engage in this discussion.  Whilst drought is common in Australia, it is a natural part of our highly variable climate. Even when the cycle of drought we are experiencing ends, Victoria is projected to get drier, have more hot days and more storms, all as a result of climate change, (DSE 2008).

Based on this prediction, asset and infrastructure protection will become a more complex issue and as communities inevitably become more informed and involved, there will be a greater opportunity for fire services and government agencies to become leaders in facilitating and assembling community perspectives on these important issues and their potential impact on the community. A logical starting point would be the context of climate change and increased risk, focussing on how we engage our community around balancing environmental issues with the protection of townships and key community assets from increased bushfire risks.

The Otway Township Protection Initiative has provided one such opportunity for the fire services and local government to engage the community on the consequences of climate change in relation to bushfire.

One of the key features of this initiative is working with communities to create Asset Protection Zones (AZP) where residential areas, townships and infrastructure abut forest and bush land whilst resolving conflicts with environmental management, i.e. mechanical modification of vegetation, up to 100m out from residents and assets on both private and public land.

The aim of the APZ's is to reduce the likelihood of house ignition and also enhance defendability of communities at the interface.

This initiative builds upon and seeks to integrate with current planning and building requirements under the Planning and Environment Act (Bushfire Management Overlay) and Building Act (Bush Fire Prone Area).

The creation of the APZ's has also highlighted a number of areas where there is potential for regulatory and policy conflict with environment legislation (state and commonwealth) and municipal planning schemes around environmental values, neighbourhood character and vegetation management.

The Otway initiative began as a pilot during the 06/07 fire season with sample APZ's established at selected locations with support form individual land owners and generated significant interest and debate from the community.

Learning's from the pilot has identified 2 key issues requiring careful planning and development if expansion of the initiative is to be successful:

1. Resolution of regulatory and local policy conflicts to achieve a balanced approach to environmental conservation and bushfire management.
2. A comprehensive and meaningful community engagement program.

Once these issues have been resolved and the initiative can proceed, the technical and engineering parts of achieving a holistic and integrated approach will have been achieved in terms of protecting key community assets and townships.

## 6. Access and Inclusion

Work under this strategic theme will have a dual focus. Initially, fire services will need to design programs to specifically target vulnerable groups such as the elderly, wives and mothers, those from other ethnic groups, the disabled and isolated to ensure that we are providing access to them in the way that we work. Where these programs already exist, e.g. Isolated Elderly, the focus will be on ensuring that we are delivering these programs in a way that encourages participation while also encompassing a community strengthening objective.

BCA is currently scoping a new way of working with vulnerable and older people within the community. This project will be implemented through a new partnership arrangement with Rural Access, Local Government, HACC and SCOPE (peak disability body). The focus will be on the way that we engage with and provide access too older, vulnerable and disabled people. It will encompass an explicit focus on community connectedness in the way we deliver, ensuring that participants become informed and connected at same time.

## CONCLUSION

Global challenges from the effects of climate change will require a much greater emphasis on a holistic and integrated emergency management planning at all levels of government with a strong commitment to the *'community safety paradigm'.*

It has become clear from my research that emergency services and government agencies have failed to learn from past disasters, particularly on achieving a proper understanding on what makes communities vulnerable. The result is a failure to effectively help and support communities to plan and prepare for the current and future challenges of climate change.

It appears the main problem is that there is a disconnect between the rhetoric and the ability to doing something about it. A key contributor to this is the existing culture which promotes professionalised and "expert centred" approaches typically emphasised 'top-down decision making, agency responsibility and control and deployment of professional expertise (McEntire, Fuller, Johnston, & Webster, 2002).

In contrast, this article contends a central component of the community safety approach is active engagement with and empowerment of the community to investigate its own risks and develops its own solutions, (Elsworth, Stevens, Gilbert, Goodman & Rhodes, 2007).

In response to this situation, BCA is seeking to develop the building blocks to achieving the '*community safety paradigm'* using 6 strategic themes to underpin a proposed community strengthening and volunteerism model. Together they are designed to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to enabling change within BCA and to achieve a holistic and fully integrated approach to bushfire management and community safety.

It is hoped this article will generate discussion and debate around the meaning of *'community safety paradigm'* among the emergency management community.

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