

FIRE NOTE

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CONTEXT

At the time this research was carried out, it had been observed that the number of women dying in fires in Australia had increased over the past 30 years as a proportion of total bushfire-related deaths. Late evacuation and passive sheltering still accounted for most of these deaths, despite community safety messages (Haynes, *et al*, 2008). To target women for bushfire safety awareness, their needs and skills need to be understood and addressed.

BACKGROUND

Women are not a homogeneous group with the same interests and capacities, and households containing women vary greatly in many ways. Within a household, when facing extreme hazards such as bushfires, the approaches taken by women often differ from those of men. In studying community education programs and exploring different responses within and between households, the specific skills, needs and responsibilities of women in bushfire events was investigated. Both the Wangary fire research publications and the Women's Skills Workshops are based on a severe fire event at Wangary, on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, on 10 January 2005. This largely agricultural area includes Port Lincoln and encompasses mainly farming communities, native scrub and areas of heavily forested national park. The fire also claimed nine lives: two men on a private fire unit and seven women and children, six of whom were in cars fleeing the fire. At the time, this was the largest number of deaths in one fire since Ash Wednesday. As a result of the fire, 93 homes were destroyed. (For more information on this fire event, see Fire Note Issue 40: A case study of the Wangary fire.)

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

Part A: A gendered analysis of the Wangary in-depth interviews

Participants in the in-depth interview study were drawn from an earlier study (Rhodes 2005). In that study, 191 respondents had advised they would be willing to participate in further investigations. In July 2005, semi-structured interviews were carried out to inquire into levels of community

A CASE FOR BUSHFIRE SAFETY INFORMATION TARGETING WOMEN



▲ The Wangary fire on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in January 2005 claimed nine lives, seven of them women and children.

SUMMARY

To be effective, community fire awareness programs need to address the different needs of people at the community, household and individual level. In households women generally perform a different and complementary role to men. This means that often they have different responsibilities, concerns and skills that need to be addressed by community safety programs. Directing fire programs to groups of women has the potential to improve both their technical skills and confidence in facing a bushfire.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Data from two pieces of related work are presented in this Fire Note: the 'Wangary Exploratory In-depth Interview Study' and the 'Women's Skills Workshops'.

The Wangary exploratory research study was part of Bushfire CRC Project, Evaluation of Community Safety Programs, within Program C: Community Self-Sufficiency for Fire Safety.

The Women's Skills Workshops followed on from the Wangary Bushfire CRC research, and were devised and presented to women by an agency partnership between Rural Solutions South Australia, and the South Australian Country Fire Service.

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◀ **Left:** Helen Goodman addresses a workshop convened by the (SA) Department of Families and Communities. The workshop was called 'Women continuing to improve the odds in disaster recovery', and was held at Port Lincoln on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in February, 2007. **Below left:** Dr Goodman (centre) continues the discussion with workshop participants.



END USER STATEMENT

"In April 2008 I participated in the 'Pilot Basic Bushfire Safety Skills Workshop for Women' that was conducted in Port Lincoln. This program gave me vital information that has allowed me to make necessary changes around my home to protect it, should another fire come this way. I have developed an action plan and gained the necessary skills and confidence. I believe all rural women should have the opportunity to participate in this program, and I have no hesitation in supporting wholeheartedly any future workshops both on the Eyre Peninsula and, indeed, throughout South Australia."

– **Heather Pope, farmer from the Vanilla area on the Lower Eyre Peninsula.**

preparedness, with 35 residents from 17 households selected from those initial 191 willing residents. The first publication from these interviews (Goodman et al, 2007) did not focus on gender issues per se, but these issues were examined later to a limited extent by Goodman and Proudley (2008), and were further analysed by Goodman and Cottrell in 2008/2009 (unpublished).

Of the 17 households in the in-depth interview study, six households had school age or younger children. Of the occupational groupings, seven were farming families, three were retired households, and seven households were noted as 'other', which included trade work, retail and hobby farmers. Of the 17 women in these households, nine were away from the home by the time the fire front hit, and eight were at the home. (The fire occurred during the school holidays, when

mothers were the main carers of children.) In order to focus on the potentially gendered aspect to the decision making within the household in relation to the fire event, we set aside the women who were away from the home at the time for reasons unrelated to the fire. We only concentrate here on the remaining 14 women.

Of the six women who left the home at the time of the fire, due to the impending fire event, only one was regarded as leaving 'early enough' – as their farm was some distance from the point of origin and her husband accurately tracked the fire's passage. Two of the six reported leaving of their own accord, and the remaining four on 'advice'; of these four, three left on advice from their husbands, and one on advice of a visiting tradesman. Of the two who left of their own accord, one had always planned to leave with her children

if a fire threatened, while the second felt she needed to reach her children, who were in town that day.

Of those who left 'on advice', each situation was complex, but the overriding finding, was that these women depended on the advice of others, and in most cases, their husbands. They all reported they lacked confidence and skill in knowing what to do. By contrast, of the eight who remained at the property, two reported acting on advice from their husbands about how to prepare for the fire, and the remaining six reported making their own decisions, but also being positively influenced by the presence of their husbands. Several of the women in both groups (those who stayed and those who did not), reported that they were dependent, in greater or lesser degrees, on the male partner. Some reported being particularly anxious and ill prepared, particularly those who left their properties. Those who stayed, in the main, reported as being grateful for their partners' greater knowledge and skill.

Women's sphere of household responsibility is often around nurturing – children, their partners, the elderly, and pets, and at the community level, around neighbours and

other community concerns. Often these roles are carried out in 'ordinary' (non emergency) times, but can flow over into emergency events. For example, during this study, those women who stayed were involved in tasks such as telephoning neighbours, preparing food and putting out spot fires.

There was limited opportunity to closely examine the specific impact of children on decision making in this study, as there were fewer families with children at home at the time. However, where women are caring for children, and where the prevailing view is that children should be removed from the fire threat, this by definition exposes women and children to the particular danger of a late departure and being caught on the roads. Men traditionally adopt a different spectrum of caring roles that involve the technical and practical side of defending their family and property. In farming or semi rural communities, this often requires developing the technical skills needed to prepare for and deal with a bushfire hazard. Sometimes their role includes deciding whether the family should stay and defend or leave, when the property is under threat. Some of the men reported this role as burdensome.

The research results demonstrated that the different roles sometimes taken up by men and women need to be recognised, and both strengthened, and in some cases, reconsidered, so that both men and women are prepared with information, and the emotional and technical skills needed to cope together with an extreme event.

Part B: A creative response by partnership agencies – tailoring fire workshops to target women

The Wangary fire exposed the particular vulnerabilities of women, highlighting a lack of technical and fire specific knowledge and skills to feel confident in responding to a fire. This led Rural Solutions and the Country Fire Service to develop a workshop-based fire program which could help equip women with the technical skills and confidence to face a bushfire.

The 'Women's Skills Workshops', as reported by De Laine et al (2008), involved three phases: a pre-workshop survey study, the workshops themselves, and an analysis of the workshop evaluation documents completed by the participants. This work was started in 2007 by distributing 682 surveys to women's groups on the Lower Eyre Peninsula to identify the aspects of bushfire management women were interested in learning about. More than half of the women who responded to the pre-workshop survey were aged over 40, and around one in five lived alone or were sole parents. The survey data (from 133



▲ Dr Helen Goodman's research into bushfire safety and gender supported education efforts by local organisations including Country Fire Service (SA) and Rural Solutions SA, who established "Fiery Women" workshops like the 2008 event pictured here.

surveys, a return rate of 19.5%) showed:

- a high interest in workshops
- a low interaction between the survey respondents and their local fire brigade
- a moderate understanding of the "prepare, stay and defend or leave early" policy (although half reported that they had experienced a bushfire), and
- variations in perceptions of risk.

Based on these findings, the topics for the first three workshops were developed: 'Preparing Yourself and Your Family'; 'Preparing Your Property'; and 'Responding to Bushfire'. A fourth workshop made up of three parts – networking (with other group members), managing anxiety and depression, and a property visit – was also delivered. The workshops' content was mostly derived from pre-existing materials on fire response and safety, with one major addition: a segment on emotional preparedness prepared by consulting psychologist, Jo-Anne Hamilton. Other innovative aspects included participatory workshop planning, workshop content that emphasised interaction, and specifically targeting the workshops at women.

The workshops were designed to combine specific fire-related information, the opportunity to practise skills, and scenario exercises in a supportive environment. Workshops were evaluated using a pre and post workshop questionnaire. The total number of women who participated in the first three workshops was 50 (with the fourth workshop held to meet specific needs).

END USER STATEMENT

"The tragic events of Tuesday 11 January 2005 stand as a stark reminder of how vulnerable we are to the ravages of extreme weather and bushfires in rural South Australia – indeed across much of the south east of Australia. This important research has identified that many of these human tragedies can be prevented through a relatively simple learning process. Following the Wangary fire near Port Lincoln in January 2005, many women reported that they 'lacked the confidence and skills in knowing what to do' and were 'particularly anxious and ill prepared' for bushfire. This research has shown that through relatively simple learning processes, women can be provided with the skills and confidence to make the right decisions in terms of their personal safety as well as the safety of the individuals they are caring for when a bushfire threatens. This valuable information has enabled fire agencies to target learning processes to ensure both men and women in rural South Australia are better 'prepared with the emotional and technical skills need to cope together' during an extreme event."

– Andrew Lawson AFSM, Deputy Chief Officer, South Australian Country Fire Service



▲ Dr Helen Goodman's research identified gaps in the skills and understanding of many women in terms of bushfire preparedness and safety – shortcomings that were later addressed at events such as this 2008 workshop (pictured above) held by the Country Fire Service (SA) and Rural Solutions SA, which aimed to bridge that knowledge gap.

Attendees also distributed 22 workshop manuals to relatives, friends and neighbours.

On the pre and post workshop questions, women reported shifts in their knowledge, confidence and preparedness. Those who reported that 'prepare, stay and defend' was their strategy doubled in number, from 39 to 85 percent. Women also indicated confidence in their chosen strategy increased sharply, and knowledge about bushfire in general increased. The women particularly appreciated the material on psychological preparedness, particularly for those who had decided to "prepare, stay and defend".

The workshops revealed that a holistic approach to personal fire management requires appreciating the skills that men and women bring to the event and increasing women's abilities, in particular, to include the technical and practical skills required in the case of a fire. Women are important keys to preventing harm in the community through their roles as the primary carers of children, their husbands, the elderly and vulnerable. Through these roles they are important in communicating risk and educating others. To use their talents to the fullest they should be better prepared in targeted community

programs and their specific needs should be better understood and addressed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several women noted that their motivation to learn centred on their role in protecting their family. Most of the workshop attendees were aged over 40, and although a crèche had been set up, few mothers with young children attended. No Indigenous women participated. The workshop organisers also reported that they emphasised the importance of practising and reviewing what had been learnt. Developing education programs based on competency skills for the community would fill a need and be an important adjunct to other community education programs offered by fire services.

WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

The Bushfire CRC work 'in-depth interview' arising from the Wangary fire event has resulted in two publications: one authored by Dr Helen Goodman, formerly a Bushfire CRC Research Fellow at RMIT's School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, Dr Jacques Boulet and Dr Lucy Healey, from Borderlands Cooperative in Melbourne, and the other by Helen Goodman and Mae

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Proudley. The Agency Partnership work (Rural Solutions and the Country Fire Service) was presented at the Bushfire CRC/AFAC Conference in Adelaide in 2008, by Di De Laine, Therese Pedler and John Probert, and published as an AFAC conference paper. Find these publications at www.bushfirecrc.com

(End note: This research predated Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires of February 2009, which has since led to the re-examination of the 'prepare, stay and defend' policy.)

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AFAC is the peak representative body for fire, emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasia region. It was established in 1993 and has 26 full and 10 affiliate members.