



SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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The bushfire safety policy for Victoria, recommended in Chapter 1, is designed to ensure that people can be safe during bushfires and assigns responsibility for this to both government and individuals. This chapter, which should be read in conjunction with Chapter 1, focuses on how those responsibilities are shared and calls for all parties to assume greater responsibility.

9.1 THE COMMISSION'S VIEW

Pervading the Commission's report is the idea that responsibility for community safety during bushfires is shared by the State, municipal councils, individuals, household members and the broader community. A fundamental aspect of the Commission's recommendations is the notion that each of these groups must accept increased responsibility for bushfire safety in the future and that many of these responsibilities must be shared.

The term 'shared responsibility' can be interpreted in various ways. During the 1990s a policy change in Australian emergency management led to a move towards 'shared responsibility', also called a 'community safety approach'. The state agency-centred approach to hazard management was replaced by a model that sought to make community members increasingly self-reliant.¹ In keeping with the policy, contingency options such as community refuges were decommissioned.² It was also during this period that the 'Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early' policy was developed in Victoria—consistent with the focus on community self-reliance.³

In this report the Commission uses the expression 'shared responsibility' somewhat differently, with the purpose of implying increased responsibility for all concerned, albeit at different levels. In Chapter 1 the Commission proposes that state agencies and municipal councils assume augmented roles in relation to emergency management, contingency planning and education. For example, it recommends that municipal councils designate community refuges and bushfire shelters for the community. Such a recommendation envisages that, in turn, communities (and individuals and households in those communities) will assume greater responsibility for their own safety.

Shared responsibility would create a situation in which the State, municipal councils, individuals, household members and the broader community all contribute to mitigating bushfire risk. Some of these contributions would overlap. For example, all landholders need to take bushfire risk-reduction measures: being a landholder, the Department of Sustainability and Environment should conduct prescribed burns on public land, and individual property owners and tenants should maintain their properties in a manner that reduces risk from bushfires. The State needs to provide educational material that describes risks and advises the community about ways of managing them. In turn, community members need to be open to this advice.

Shared responsibility does not mean equal responsibility: in the Commission's view there are some areas in which the State should assume greater responsibility than the community. For example, in most instances state fire authorities will be more capable than individuals when it comes to identifying the risks associated with bushfire; the State should therefore assume greater responsibility for working to minimise those risks.

9.2 STATE AGENCIES AND MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

The Commission considers that, in general, the State and local governments need to provide better leadership and guidance. For the State (including fire agencies), this includes strengthening fire mitigation measures, providing more effective warnings and education, providing evacuation advice as required during bushfires, improving fire-suppression techniques and practices, deftly managing people during an emergency, providing assistance for vulnerable people, and offering frank advice about the defendability of property to individuals and households.

Among the responsibilities of municipal councils are developing local plans, providing community refuges and bushfire shelters (in partnership with the State), implementing vegetation and roadside management programs (in accordance with simplified legislative processes) and ensuring compliance with building and land-use planning provisions.

352 Individuals and communities also play an important part in contributing to community safety during bushfires, but they need support from the State and from municipal councils. The support offered must be relevant, appealing and easy to obtain; it should be available in a variety of forms; and it should cater for a variety of needs.

9.3 INDIVIDUALS

Bushfire safety depends greatly on the behaviour of individuals and involves considerations that can be difficult, time consuming and complex. The Commission envisages that individuals in areas of high fire risk will take responsibility for their own safety. This might mean them doing the following:

- attending community education meetings, adequately maintaining properties to minimise fire risk, and preparing a comprehensive household fire plan
- ensuring the safety of vulnerable people
- deciding on options and, if a severe bushfire threatens, where they will relocate
- balancing the cost of building and maintaining protective infrastructure such as a bunker and buying robust but expensive firefighting equipment against other measures
- deciding what to do with pets and other animals during an evacuation or when defending a property
- deciding what personal property to take and what to abandon in an emergency.

People living in rented housing might not be able to deal with some of these considerations independently. The Commission urges tenants to be active in raising any concerns with their landlords.

The factors affecting bushfire safety are dynamic: conditions can change radically during a bushfire.⁴ This means individuals need to have contingency plans and to make decisions as the situation evolves. For example, plans to stay and defend a property can be compromised by a sudden loss of water or a wind change that makes the property undefendable. Similarly, plans to evacuate might be foiled by road blockages or car failure.

Individuals who live in fire-prone areas need to take the initiative in learning about, preparing for and responding to bushfires. This means they need to devote a considerable amount of time and effort to learning about bushfires and about how fire in their local area might affect them. They must also update and refresh their bushfire knowledge regularly, to make sure they are as well prepared as possible during each fire season.

Crucially—and in accordance with the proposed Black Saturday Upgrade (see Chapter 1)—individuals must develop an understanding of the difference between a ‘normal’ bushfire and a ferocious fire (like those experienced on 7 February 2009) and how to respond in each case. It is also important to accept that it might not always be possible to anticipate what type of fire is approaching before it actually arrives. In such cases individual planning needs to be ‘worst case’.

For most people, it will not be enough to rely on the bushfire awareness of family, neighbours and friends: personal awareness is essential. The Commission was disappointed to hear evidence about poorly attended CFA information sessions before 7 February.⁵ It urges all who live in bushfire-prone areas to avail themselves of the information and education sessions fire authorities provide.

In Chapter 1 the Commission recommends improving official warnings when bushfires threaten communities, to help community members understand the safest available options. If warnings are to be effective, though, individuals must listen and watch for those relevant to them. And they must act on them without delay and be ready to change their plans to suit changing local conditions. If possible, on days of high fire danger people should monitor radio and television stations and websites and contact the Victorian Bushfires Information Line and their neighbours in their ‘phone tree’ to obtain information. Mobile phones should be charged in advance and carried at all times. People should not wait to receive personal warnings from authorities.

Depending on the severity of a fire, the weather conditions and the topography, some individuals and groups of people will need help to protect themselves when a bushfire looms. Some people will need more assistance than others, and people with vulnerabilities will probably need different levels of support from the State and from municipal councils. The Commission recommends planning and evacuation support for vulnerable people, as discussed in Chapter 1.

To the extent that they are able to contribute to their own safety, vulnerable people should be encouraged and empowered to do so, but they should be discouraged from staying to defend property.

9.4 HOUSEHOLDS

Household planning is vital. Each household should have a customised bushfire safety plan that can be adapted to suit changing circumstances. The plan should take into account the health and age of the household members, the number of people who live in the house (and the fact that some might not be home or visitors might be present when bushfires threaten), the location of the house, the topography and vegetation, and advice received about the defendability of the house. A 'one size fits all' approach is not suitable: plans are likely to differ between households in the same street. Similarly, household members need different plans for different types of bushfires. For example, it might be feasible for some people to stay and defend a well-prepared and defensible property against a 'normal' bushfire, but that plan could prove lethal in the face of a ferocious fire, when some properties are simply not defensible.

Household members are dependent on each other during a bushfire. The Commission received evidence showing that disagreement among household members about what to do during a bushfire can have tragic consequences.⁶ Before each fire season all household members need to agree about the terms of their bushfire safety plan (including contingency plans), the triggers for action, and how they will act on the plan during an emergency.

Households should pay specific attention to the safety of vulnerable people.

9.5 COMMUNITIES

Communities that have a large number of informed individuals who work together will be safer and stronger. Individual members of these communities can make themselves safer by drawing on the support and resources of others.

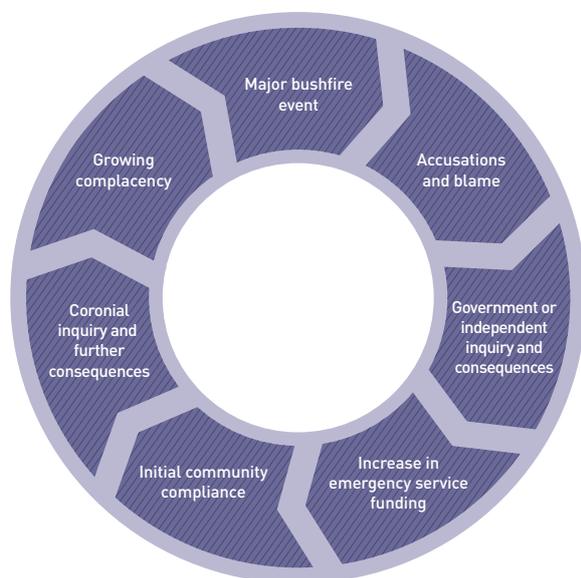
Evidence the Commission received suggests that some of the best prepared people on 7 February were those who were involved with their communities in forming community 'fireguard' groups and 'phone trees'. The Commission observed, however, that being well prepared is no guarantee of survival: the extreme conditions of the day overwhelmed many, and some well-prepared people died because the fire was savage and their home was not defensible.⁷ The entire community must come to understand the difference between this type of fire and a 'normal' bushfire and plan accordingly.

9.6 COMPLACENCY

Fast-moving fires of extreme intensity can occur in Victoria during any summer, and in the past century they have increasingly occurred in populated areas. Bushfires causing 10 or more deaths have occurred roughly once in a generation, although climate change could cause fires of this nature to become more numerous in future.⁸

The Commission considers that community and government complacency can place some people at risk of death when bushfires occur. The State needs to help break this cycle with sustained efforts to deliver frank education and public awareness campaigns. Individuals, household members and communities share responsibility for ensuring lasting compliance with Victoria's revised bushfire safety policy. Figure 9.1 illustrates how complacency sets in between catastrophic bushfires.⁹

Figure 9.1 The bushfire cycle



Source: Exhibit 142 – 2004 COAG Report.¹⁰

9.7 COMMUNITY MEMORY

The Commission is concerned that ‘community memory’ of ferocious fires is difficult to maintain.¹¹ A lack of such memory has been evident in the past. For example, in his report on the 1939 Black Friday fires, Justice Stretton described the severe drought conditions that preceded those fires and observed:

Men who had lived their lives in the bush went their ways in the shadow of dread expectancy. But though they felt the imminence of danger they could not tell that it was to be far greater than they could imagine. They had not lived long enough. The experience of the past could not guide them to an understanding of what might, and did, happen.¹²

The Commission notes with approval the memorials that are being or have been built in some of the places that were worst affected on 7 February and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s proposal to observe each anniversary of 7 February with a minute’s silence and flags flying at half mast.¹³ In Chapter 1 the Commission proposes measures (such as changes to school curricula) to help maintain community memory of bushfire safety and history.

The State’s bushfire safety campaign should bluntly deliver the messages that ultimate responsibility for health and safety lies with individuals, that tragedy can come suddenly, and that bushfire can kill or have lifelong consequences. The Commission also urges the State to develop a range of incentives relating to individuals’ bushfire safety behaviour.

9.8 DECISION MAKING

One theme that emerged from the evidence before the Commission was that people underestimated the threat posed by the bushfires of 7 February and appeared reluctant to change their plans, sometimes with fatal consequences.¹⁴ Further, the experience of facing a bushfire can be very stressful, which can lead to poor decision making at the time. People need to take these factors into account when they plan their response to fire.

There are a number of situations in which people who would like to defend their home should abandon the idea, even if this is a difficult decision. Among such situations are the following:

- Household members have been advised or are otherwise aware that, because of the surrounding terrain and vegetation, their property is undefendable in any bushfire.
- A property is partially, but not adequately, equipped or prepared.
- The people who plan to fight the fire are responsible for the welfare of others who are vulnerable or are themselves vulnerable.
- Extreme weather conditions are predicted or there is a Black Saturday Upgrade, or both.

On the question of inadequate equipment, the Commission observed that suitable firefighting equipment is expensive and beyond the means of many people who live in bushfire-prone areas. It is the Commission's opinion that people who, for whatever reason, cannot adequately equip themselves to defend their properties should not try to defend them in any circumstances. The State should reinforce this message through educational programs and advice to individuals.

Bushfires also interrupt personal plans and create dilemmas. A number of people who died or almost died on 7 February were planning to celebrate a birthday party that evening.¹⁵ Others were tourists.¹⁶ When making the decision to stay and defend their properties, some people were influenced by their attachment to their pets or their 'dream home'.¹⁷ Their decision making was often further complicated by insufficient warnings about the danger of the situation.

Even with better warnings, however, these personal dilemmas are not trivial or easily resolved. The Commission does not suggest that any of those who died gave insufficient priority to their safety, but it does consider that these types of dilemmas should be openly discussed in education programs. The education delivered should prompt people to consider their personal circumstances, not just their capacity to fight fire or evacuate in a particular way. For example, individuals need to be challenged to think about what they would do if bushfire threatened them before or during a party, or about whether they would protect or leave their pets. People need to be aware that bushfires do not necessarily arrive at convenient moments or allow time to make plans for the safety of people and property.

The simple message is that everyone who lives in (or visits) bushfire-prone areas in Victoria needs to understand that fires can occur regularly in those places during summer. When bushfires—particularly fast-moving fires of extreme intensity—occur in populated areas, there is potential for tragedy.

Sound preparation and effective responses on the part of the State, municipal councils, the community and individuals will collectively help to minimise harm.

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- 1 Exhibit 101 – Statement of Rhodes (WIT.3004.002.0001) [86]–[88]
 - 2 Free T2999:19–T2999:22; Esplin T18917:4–T18917:9
 - 3 Exhibit 85 – Statement of Gledhill (WIT.025.002.0001) [10], [12], [14], [21]
 - 4 Cova T18855:28–T18856:17
 - 5 For example: Exhibit 390 – Statement of Wigginton (WIT.100.001.0001_R) [13]–[14]; Exhibit 385 – Statement of Cherry (WIT.107.001.0001_R) [7]
 - 6 Exhibit 767 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001825 (EXH.767.0001); Exhibit 835 – Statement of Thomas (WIT.152.001.0001_R) [8]
 - 7 Exhibit 884 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001835 (EXH.884.0001); Exhibit 567 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001887 (EXH.567.0001); Exhibit 763 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001873 (EXH.763.0001); Exhibit 950 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001779 (EXH.950.0001)
 - 8 Buxton T14526:24–T14526:28; Pinfold T14535:4–T14535:7
 - 9 Exhibit 142 – 2004 COAG Report (TEN.049.001.0001) at 0267
 - 10 Exhibit 142 – 2004 COAG Report (TEN.049.001.0001) at 0267
 - 11 McFarlane T11633:3–T11634:19, T11634:29–T11635:14 ('Community memory' is used interchangeably with 'generational memory')
 - 12 Exhibit 81 – 1939 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Report (TEN.028.001.0001) at 0004
 - 13 Exhibit 998 – Address on the National Day of Mourning for the Victims of the Victoria Bushfires – Rod Laver Arena – Melbourne (TEN.310.001.0001)
 - 14 Exhibit 362 – Statement of Glenn (WIT.066.001.0001_R); Exhibit 949 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001868 (EXH.949.0001); Exhibit 293 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001784 (EXH.293.0001)
 - 15 Exhibit 805 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001854 (EXH.805.0001); Exhibit 764 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001785 and INTMEN 001979 (EXH.764.0001); Exhibit 765 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001810 (EXH.765.0001)
 - 16 Exhibit 829 – Statement of Wallace (WIT.151.001.0001_R); Exhibit 490 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001976 (EXH.490.0001); Exhibit 565 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001870 (EXH.565.0001)
 - 17 Exhibit 567 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001887 (EXH.567.0001); Exhibit 949 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001868 (EXH.949.0001); Exhibit 809 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001818 (EXH.809.0001); Exhibit 182 – Statement of Moore (WIT.076.001.0001_R) [23]; Exhibit 489 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001797 (EXH.489.0001); Exhibit 770 – Interactive Presentation – INTMEN 001877 (EXH.770.0001)

