

Paper Title

Linking community bushfire education strategies to the community

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Abstract:

Community bushfire education is increasingly becoming a key component of fire and emergency services strategies through out the world. Based on the premise that well informed communities in times of emergencies are better able to act in appropriate ways to reduce the loss of life and property, bushfire education strategies have advanced beyond information brochures to education programs delivered by trained educators. However, if bushfire education is to be truly effective it must be able to reach not only those that are aware of the bushfire threat and able to participate in the education process, but also those in the community that are at highest risk and those difficult to engage. Evaluation of the current education strategies used by the South Australian Country Fire Service combined with interviews with communities involved in bushfires have assisted in the development of a bushfire education model that extends into the community beyond that of traditional approaches to bushfire education.

## **Introduction.**

Traditionally bushfire awareness strategies have utilised a range of publicity material, mass media and more recently the Internet to provide information relating to bushfire preparedness and prevention. While a broad brush approach towards information dissemination has provided the development of a vast range of brochures, booklets and fact sheets, often referred to as passive publicity, the limitations of such resources to effectively bring about the desired behaviour has also been recognised by fire authorities.

An understanding of the educational limitations of passive publicity promoted the South Australia Country Fire Service (CFS) to adopt strategies that are based on educational principles. Community education programs initially developed in Victoria by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) have been tailored to the South Australia environment. Today programs such as “Community Fire Safe” and more recently “Bushfire Blitz” form an integral part of CFS community safety campaign for bushfire in the Mt Lofty Ranges.

Adult and community education principles are underpinning philosophies of both programs. Emphasis is upon the learner as an active participation in the learning and decision making process and on the problems and the needs of the people as a starting point. Both programs also recognise that “communities” are groups, which are not indifferent to each other’s interest, but which are likely to contain conflicting interest.

The role of the facilitator is central to the delivery of both programs. Successfully drawing together the “community “ as an interested group and assisting them to develop appropriate bushfire prevention and preparedness strategies requires the facilitator to have command of a range of skills and knowledge that goes beyond an understanding of bushfire. The effective facilitator has the ability to work outside of established programs to “tailor make” appropriate education strategies to meet the communities needs.

## Existing Program Approach

Community Fire Safe and Bushfire Blitz apply an integrated approach to community safety by combining three different strategies. The first strategy utilises District Bushfire Prevention Committees (DBPC) to identify vulnerable communities and incorporate them into their bushfire prevention plans. The second strategy involves the formation of Community Fire Safe Groups to educate the public about bushfire fire prevention and community safety. The third strategy involves training CFS brigades in bushfire prevention and community safety and encouraging them to support groups that form in their response area (refer to Fig 1.0).

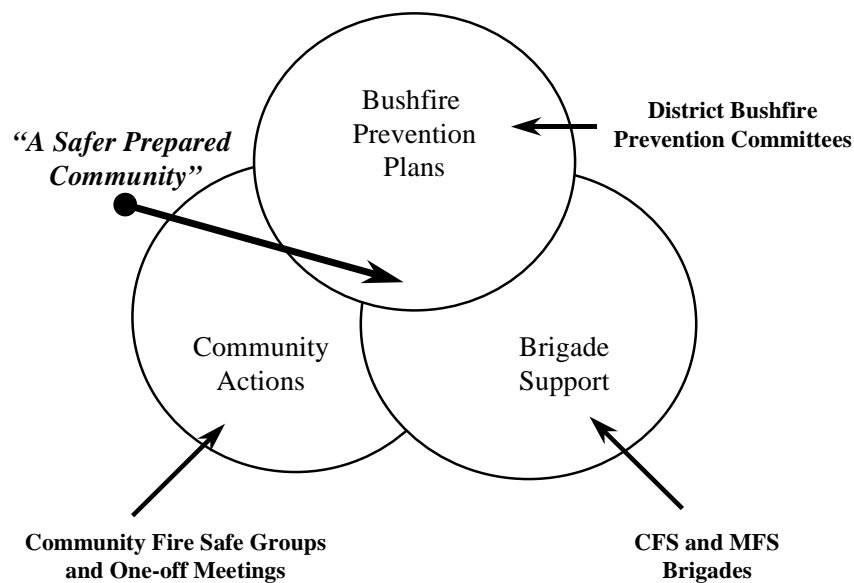


Fig 1.0 Integrated approach of Community Fire Safe and Bushfire Blitz.

The Community Fire Safe program encourages people living in high fire risk areas to take responsibility for their own fire safety. Through participating in the program residents become aware of the level of risk they may face in a bushfire and adopt appropriate strategies based on their individual circumstances.

A range of community strategies may also be adopted by residents, these include the development of community action plans to assist vulnerable members of the community, telephone trees to assist information flow through a local area, and organising and participating in working bees aimed at reducing the bushfire hazard.

## **Program Success and limitations**

The Community Fire Safe program has been successful in targeting communities and initiating community groups within the defined boundaries of the programs aims and objectives. The program has continued to grow each season since its inception in the 1998/1999 fire danger seasons. Community groups have formed throughout the high bushfire risk areas of the Mount Lofty Ranges in urban, and rural areas.

The Community Fire Safe program has had considerably more success initiating and maintaining community groups in semi-rural communities compared to high population density communities. Once formed, community groups in semi rural locations are also more likely to maintain higher participation rates, involve more residents from the local area, participate in more community meetings and are more likely to develop community strategies such as telephone trees.

Analyses of surveys collected from participants in the community fire safe program indicated that a pre-existing level of knowledge relating to bushfire issues exists amongst most participants. This pre existing level of knowledge was identified as important in forming and maintaining the community group.

Identifying reasons that prevent residents from participating in the Community Fire Safe program has helped in the development of more suitable community education strategies to target high and medium risk communities.

## **Reaching high population density bushfire risk areas.**

Following from the success of the CFA community awareness program "Bushfire Blitz", the CFS introduced the program of the same name during the 2002/2003-fire danger season. Trained community facilitators were employed for the duration of the program to deliver bushfire awareness information in high risk, high population density areas. The same areas had been targeted in previous fire danger seasons by the Community Fire Safe program but had experienced difficulty in initiating community groups.

Each facilitator was provided with a van brightly advertising the program and equipped with resources to conduct community meetings in open spaces such as car parks and off street reserves. Meetings were advertised by direct mail out to individual residents and by advertisements in local newspapers. Meetings aimed to raise participant's level of awareness of the actual bushfire threat and to provide information relating to the range of prevention and planning options.

The employment of facilitators removed the level of CFS brigade involvement necessary to deliver a meeting. While brigade involvement was and still is a critical ingredient in both Bushfire Blitz and Community Fire Safe programs, the employment of facilitators removed the role of the local brigade from planner, meeting organiser and meeting deliverer to that of a participant at meetings. Facilitators planned and scheduled meetings in consultation with brigades and DBPC. This method of program delivery maintained consistency in meeting format and information and ensured meetings went ahead even if brigades were unable to attend due to other commitments.

The use of a facilitator also enabled the Bushfire Blitz program to promote further avenues for the residents to continue in their bushfire safety preparation efforts inline with the actual level of threat and personal ability. Survey information collected from the Bushfire Blitz meetings in 2002/2003 indicated people attending a meeting were not as prepared for bushfire, had lower levels of awareness of the bushfire threat and were less likely to understand the

benefits of community actions when compared to residents that were attending their first Community Fire Safe meeting.

In high population density bushfire risk locations of the Mount Lofty Ranges, Bushfire Blitz's ability to originate contact with the community and to initiate Community Fire Safe groups has established the program as an essential tool for CFS in the delivery of its bushfire education strategies.

Trialling the Bushfire Blitz program in semi rural areas received mixed responses from participants. Residents attending meetings indicated the information supplied at meetings, while relevant was insufficient to adequately assist them to better prepare for bushfires.

### **Targeting community education strategies.**

Establishing a team of facilitators has provided the CFS with the flexibility to development bushfire education programs that target specific communities. The capacity to "tailor make" initiatives that better reflect the audience's needs have increased the range of people attending bushfire education programs. Initiatives such as "Bushfire Prevention Workshops" are one example where facilitators have been able to reach audiences that had previously not been involved in either Community Fire Safe or Bushfire Blitz.

Where a need for a community education approach to the bushfire threat has been identified an analysis of the community to be targeted quickly determines the best education program or combination of programs to be implemented. Program resources are maximised and community participation is increased. The education strategy implemented also gains the best possible effect, in that the information delivered reflects the level of community awareness and bushfire threat.

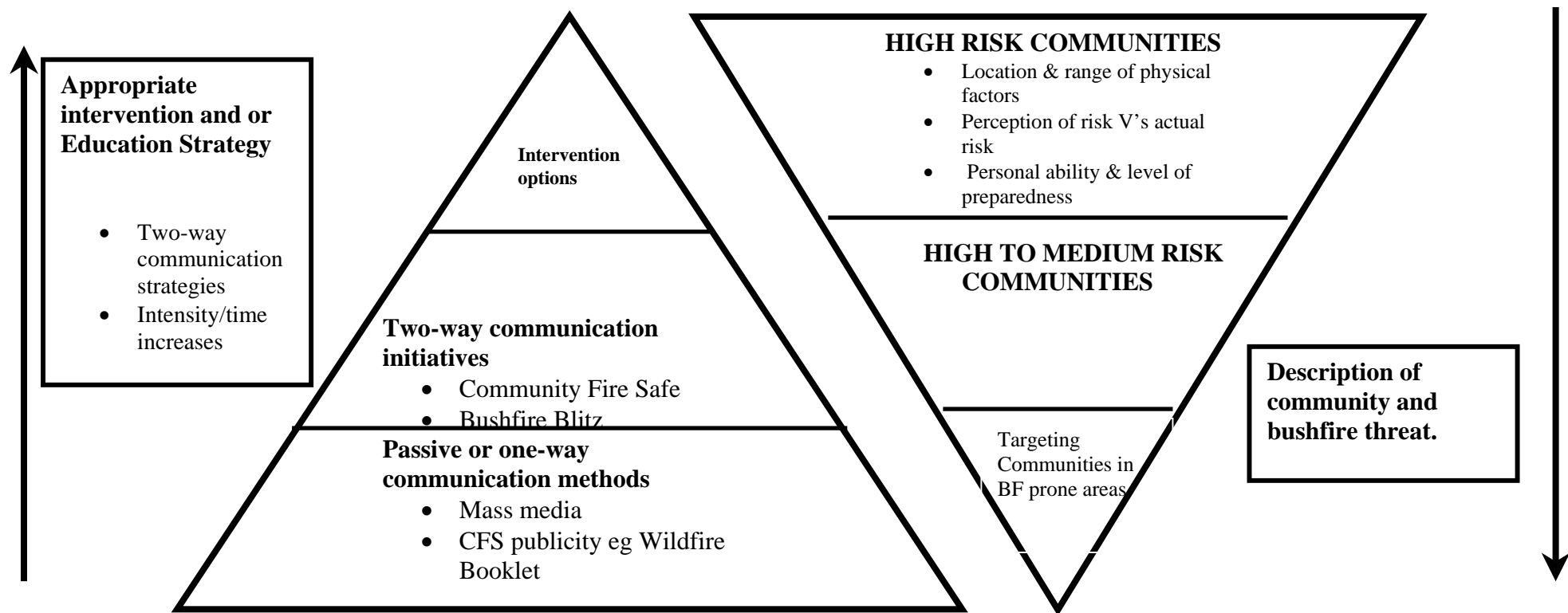


Figure 2.0. Identifying appropriate education and intervention strategies relating to bushfire threat and communities motivation.

