



### AUSTRALASIAN FIRE AUTHORITIES COUNCIL

### POSITION PAPER ON COMMUNITY SAFETY AND EVACUATION DURING BUSHFIRES

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## Aim

This position paper has been developed by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) to provide guidance on bushfire safety and evacuation decision making by fire agencies and for the use by other associated emergency services and support agencies.

## Preamble

Bushfires regularly threaten communities throughout Australia with the risk of death or injury to residents, and destruction or damage of their property, environmental values, and other community assets. The responsibility for reducing the loss of life and property lies jointly with State agencies, local government, the communities and individuals.

Bushfire losses can be reduced by preventing fire, limiting its spread, making preparations to protect life and property, and responding effectively during and after fire. Fire authorities are not able to guarantee the presence of a fire fighting vehicle and crew to protect every residence at risk during major or multiple bushfires, although they will endeavour to provide sufficient firefighting resources to support people defending themselves.

**Houses protect people and people protect houses.** Research conducted following major bushfires in Australia has concluded that the most buildings lost in bushfire situations are the result of initially small fires started by sparks and embers. A building will generally survive the initial passage of a fire front providing adequate preparations have been made. People who are well prepared and take shelter in their homes have an excellent chance of surviving a bushfire. Also, houses will survive if people remain to extinguish small fires started in and around them.

**Fire authorities no longer advocate large-scale evacuation of people from areas threatened by bushfires.** In modern times it has been the practice in Australia and in other places for people to be evacuated from sources of danger such as bushfires. Simply not being there and exposed to a hazard eliminates the risk. With some natural hazards such as floods and cyclones there can be sufficient warning time to enable people to safely leave the area. However bushfires often occur without warning and move rapidly. Research into Australian bushfire fatalities shows that last minute evacuations from bushfires contributed to the majority of deaths. Late evacuation is inherently dangerous and can cause greater risks than remaining in the fire area.

Communities at risk from bushfires should be allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for their own safety. Where adequate fire protection measures have been implemented, able-bodied people should be encouraged to stay. Where there is an adequate warning time people such as: the very young, the old, the infirm, those who feel they would not cope with the trauma of fire, and those who have not taken sufficient measures to protect their homes should leave. Evacuation does not necessarily need to involve long distance disruptive and logistically difficult movement. Where safe havens exist close by, they should be used in preference to moving well away from the affected area. The decision to stay or leave during a bushfire must be made following careful consideration of all the factors bearing upon the situation and the information available at the time.

## Adequate Fire Protection Measures

### Defendable space

The single most important fire protection measure influencing the safety of people and their property is the creation of a 'defendable space' around houses and other buildings. Defendable space is an area surrounding a building that is free of, (or significantly reduced) continuous combustible vegetation or other fuels. Having a defendable space essentially provides a firebreak that limits the ability of a moving fire to spread directly to a building. It provides a relatively safe area from which an advancing fire can be controlled and within which firefighters and residents can control spark and ember caused fires on and around a building.

### Householder planning

Residents in or near areas that may be threatened by bushfires should be encouraged to make plans in relation to how they will manage their safety a when bushfire occurs. Some of their considerations should be:

- Mental and physical preparation
- Arrangements for the early departure of vulnerable people
- Alternative water supplies
- Basic firefighting equipment
- Suitable clothing
- Means of receiving information – battery powered radio

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## Evacuation Considerations

### Self-evacuation

Self evacuation is the self-initiated movement of people from the at risk area to a place of safe refuge, either in advance of a bushfire or in anticipation such as on a day of forecast extreme fire danger. The risks associated with relocating increase dramatically as a fire front gets nearer.

It is highly recommended that all people who are not physically or mentally prepared to undertake firefighting activities should move to a safe area well ahead of a fire's arrival. This group of people usually includes the very young, older people who may no longer be physically agile and sick or immobile people. People who believe they are not capable of enduring the trauma associated with a bushfire situation or people who just do not, for whatever reason, want to be there, should relocate to a safe place well before a fire is expected. Those people who have not adequately prepared should also leave and relocate early.

### Required Evacuation

Required or directed evacuation of people by an emergency service may be needed because of the imminent threat to those people. People who have not undertaken adequate preparations and who choose not to leave may put their life or other lives at risk by remaining. Where a person's life is immediately at risk by them remaining in a particular location they may be advised to evacuate. Should that advice be ignored, evacuation may be enforced. This is subject to individual State legislation which varies around Australia (see below – Authority to Evacuate).

### Access and Egress

Whilst every encouragement should be given for people to leave early or return home to defend their property, safety in transit must be a high priority. The risks involved in moving through a bushfire zone can be very high. Many deaths have been caused by people being trapped on unsafe roads. Safe access is a major issue for both people leaving and for those returning home before the fire arrives, as well as after it has moved through. Police generally have responsibility for road closures and road safety. Guidelines need to be developed jointly by police and fire authorities to provide safe access and

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egress to residents, emergency services and the media. Such guidelines should consider

- Roads being closed when they become unsafe (either through smoke, falling trees and powerlines, etc) and will remain closed until they return to a safe condition.
- Police should close roads when requested by the fire authority to facilitate safe fire fighting operations.
- Whilst roads are closed, access should only be allowed for emergency service vehicles. Residents/media seeking access may only be allowed access where an appropriate escort can be provided e.g. fire or police vehicle. This action will depend upon the priorities of the emergency services at the time.
- The attendance of residents at their homes is a legitimate fire protection strategy; therefore roads should be reopened for residents as soon as practicable and safe to do so.

## Authority to Evacuate

AFAC believes that a framework is needed throughout Australia that allows and encourages members of the community to take responsibility for their own safety and that of their property. AFAC also believes the decision to evacuate people should be made by the lead fire combat authority. Where legislation exists that enables forced evacuation a protocol should be developed between the relevant authorities to allow people having a pecuniary interest in property involved to only be forcibly removed during a bushfire when they are in imminent danger of death or serious injury. The time involved in dealing with resisting residents can seriously hamper the process of warning and evacuating other members of the community.

Any framework should allow fire agencies, as the lead combat authority to implement strategies for community safety from bushfires, which includes avoiding ad hoc evacuation of people. It should allow residents to choose options that suit them (such as sheltering in their own homes, moving to a neighbour's house or relocating to a nearby refuge).

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## Information and Warnings

During the course of a bushfire it is essential that all people in threatened communities have ready access to accurate information to assist them in their decision-making.

The fire authority should be responsible for providing advice for residents who are likely to be threatened by a bushfire. Fire authorities have access to the necessary information and the expertise to determine the level of bushfire threat.

It is essential that the Fire or Incident Controller provides timely advice and consults closely with Police or Emergency Co-ordinator and with other support agencies.

## Planning for Fire Emergencies

AFAC advocates that emergency management agencies and local government, in consultation with the community, should actively seek the development and implementation of local fire emergency plans and strategies for all those areas with a high bushfire threat. Such local fire emergency plans should include the following considerations:

- Identification of areas of low and high fire hazard;
- Identification of vulnerable people;
- Identification of safe refuges, and low risk and high risk access roads;
- Community awareness and preparedness programs (e.g. Community Fireguard);
- Arrangements for effective public warning systems and communications and;
- Arrangements for training exercises to test plans.

The local fire emergency plans should include strategies that encourage

homeowners, landholders and managers to prepare their properties before the start of the bushfire season.

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## Local Emergency Response Plans

The local fire emergency response plans should promote the natural desire of most people to protect their own property and to make their own decisions during emergencies. The focus of these local arrangements should be to:

- Provide adequate information that allows residents to understand the risks and consequences of staying or evacuating from their homes in the event of bushfires;
- Help those who wish to leave;
- Encourage people to make an early decision to leave or to stay to avoid last minute, panic-stricken attempts to flee from bushfire;
- Develop and implement strategies to manage people fleeing at the last minute;
- Provide suitable support and welfare services during all phases of relocation;
- Develop and foster an effective and reliable information flow between the emergency authorities and people in the community;
- Develop and implement strategies that support the safe return of able-bodied residents to their homes as soon as possible after the main fire has passed.