



Living with Fire A Community Engagement Framework 2008-2012

For more information please contact:

Agency	Website	Telephone
Country Fire Authority (CFA)	www.cfa.vic.gov.au	03 9262 8444
Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE)	www.dse.vic.gov.au	03 9412 4777
Department of Human Services (DHS)	www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency	03 9096 8849
Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB)	www.mfb.vic.gov.au	03 9665 4464

Designed & Printed by Courtney (03 9735 5311)

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Living with Fire

The *Living with Fire Framework (Living with Fire)* is a joint initiative of the Victorian Government and Victoria's fire agencies to coordinate all awareness, information, education and empowerment programs relating to fire in the environment, based on three key themes of **People, Communities and Environment**.

Living with Fire aims to heighten awareness and understanding of the bushfire risk and increase the capacity of people in Victoria to prevent, prepare for, deal with and recover from bushfire. *Living with Fire* also works to build the capacity of communities to work together to enhance community resilience and well-being. There is a focus on promoting the role of fire in the environment and the complex nature of fire management, while raising awareness of the benefits, difficulties and risks associated with planned burning.

Through *Living with Fire*, the Victorian Government and Victoria's fire agencies will work together to manage the growing bushfire risk associated with climatic change and other challenges. *Living with Fire* articulates how the Victorian Government will deliver a series of strategies, initiatives and programs to ensure a healthy and safe environment for all people in Victoria.

All strategies that sit under *Living with Fire* will be based on principles of environmentally sustainable fire management and will be targeted towards people living, working in and visiting Victoria, including areas with a high bushfire risk such as rural areas, regional cities and urban interface areas.

Background

Victoria has experienced a number of major fires over recent years, which have reinforced the importance of effective community education and engagement in building community capacity to prevent, prepare for, deal with and recover from major fire incidents. Increasingly hot and dry conditions contribute to an extreme fire risk in Victoria and significant fire activity is likely to feature in the coming years. Whether it is about the increased fire risk, smoke, fire safety, community well-being or environmental sustainability, fire services and other agencies have a responsibility to educate and engage with Victorians and encourage participation in a wide range of fire management issues.

Following key recommendations from the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry (VBI) in 2003, Victoria's three fire agencies, Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) joined together to develop Fire Ready Victoria (FRV) 2004 – 2007, a three year strategy that documented Victoria's approach for delivering bushfire information and education programs. The FRV Strategy delivered a range of highly successful community safety programs and evaluation of the strategy has identified further opportunities to engage with communities and build community capacity to live with fire.

More recently Victoria's fire services (CFA, DSE and MFB) have joined with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to enable a more coordinated approach to delivering services across the Prevention Preparedness Response and Recovery (PPRR) continuum and in regard to the use of fire for managing ecosystems. This four way partnership underpins *Living with Fire*.

Through *Living with Fire* agencies will deliver a range of community education and engagement programs in relation to fire, planned burning, smoke and fire safety, which will lead Victoria forward in supporting healthy environments, safe and healthy people, strong and resilient communities, and will encourage people to become active participants in sustainable fire management on both public and private land.





LIVING WITH FIRE PARTNERS

Living with Fire is a framework for cooperation between CFA, DSE, DHS and MFB. These four agencies have a legislative responsibility for fire management and a commitment to promote community well-being in relation to fire in Victoria.

Together the four agencies work to bring integrated services to people in Victoria by:

- delivering services so that all Victorians and visitors to Victoria are supported to increase their safety and well-being in relation to fire
- working with other government agencies, community organisations and the business sector to develop integrated risk based products and services that contribute to the safety and well-being of people in Victoria and the sustainability of Victorian ecosystems

Through *Living with Fire*, agencies will work throughout the year to educate and engage communities on issues regarding community safety, health and well-being and sustainable fire management. In some cases the activities of *Living with Fire* will be delivered as joint agency initiatives in order to provide seamless services to the community. In addition, individual agencies will supplement *Living with Fire* with their own tailored programs.

CHALLENGES

The Victorian environment has evolved with fire and bushfires play a vital role in our natural environment by maintaining the health of species and ecosystems. However, Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the world and the threat of losing life and property from bushfire is ever present.

Climate change is predicted to dramatically increase the frequency of fire danger weather, while the current drought situation has led to increasingly dry and flammable vegetation and serious water shortages. In addition, a history of efficient fire suppression has led to the build up of vegetation, which has increased the fuel loads in many ecosystems.

The increased use of planned burning in the environment will assist in the reduction of fuel loads but it is not without risk. However, if sufficient burning is not carried out, the very real risk of more frequent and larger uncontrolled bushfires needs to be understood. Bushfires generally spread more rapidly and burn more intensely, during summer when the risks to people, natural and built assets are greater. Planned burning still carries some risk but it is a vital tool for achieving safer communities and healthier environments.

At the same time, Victoria is also experiencing the expansion of the urban-rural fringe communities, with increased numbers of houses in extremely high fire risk areas. Social demographic change is showing high population turnover, increased numbers of

transient populations and a greater diversity in cultural practices and languages. Meanwhile, Victoria's thriving tourism industry brings millions of holiday-makers to visit high fire risk areas each year.

The combination of drought, climate change, unnaturally high fuel loads and greater numbers of people in high risk areas has created an unprecedented bushfire risk.

In addition, large bushfires can be a significant health concern for Victorians as the decrease in air quality caused by smoke can exacerbate respiratory and other health issues.

Many people exposed to the risks from bushfires have little knowledge or understanding about the natural role of fire in the environment or the risks fires create and are ill-prepared to deal with the emotional and health effects from a major bushfire. In addition, facilitating sustained behaviour change is complex and it is difficult to measure progress.

The challenge of fire agencies and the Victorian Government is to continue to reach the ever changing Victorian public and support them to understand the processes used to manage fire and to prepare for the risks associated with fire.



Vision for *Living with Fire*

Self-reliant people and active communities who live with fire in a safe and sustainable way...

The vision of *Living with Fire* is centred on three essential themes of **people, communities** and the **environment** and seeks progress towards a Victoria where:

- People feel safe and are confident in managing their health and well-being in relation to fire
- Communities work in partnership with agencies to manage and make informed decisions about the risks and consequences associated with fire
- The natural environment is highly valued and fire is managed in a way that is sustainable



People

The Victorian Government and Victoria's fire services are working hard to make Victoria a safer and healthier place to live – but they cannot work alone. During major emergencies such as large bushfires, resources are under considerable demand and it is not possible to provide assistance to every individual. People who are living in or visiting high risk areas will need to take responsibility for their own safety by becoming more self-reliant.

Fire safety is a shared responsibility for all people in Victoria and individuals, households and communities need to take appropriate action to increase their safety in relation to fire. Communities also need to be proactive in managing their personal well-being and recovery, and work with agencies to ensure that immediate needs and long term issues are addressed.

Through *Living with Fire*, CFA, DSE, DHS and MFB will work together to increase public awareness and understanding of the bushfire risk with a view to building self-reliance, particularly with communities living in high bushfire risk areas and with individuals facing high risks.



GOAL ONE:

Encourage and facilitate people in Victoria to become self-reliant by developing the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to be proactive in managing their health and safety in relation to the effects of fire.

OBJECTIVES:

- To educate people at risk from bushfire and increase the adoption of safe practices relating to fire prevention, preparedness and response
- To deliver timely and accurate information during incidents to promote safe and appropriate community responses
- To increase awareness of public health issues associated with bushfires and planned burning, and encourage proactive health behaviour
- To promote awareness of the mental health impacts of bushfire and the services available for enhancing psychological well-being
- To support people in their recovery after the impact of bushfire

STRATEGIES 2008 - 2012

The key strategies under this theme are aimed towards residents, visitors and workers who are exposed to the risk of bushfire.

People who are residents of high bushfire risk areas need to be particularly vigilant in preventing, planning and preparing for bushfires. The complexity of personal safety and house survival is highly challenging and a range of programs is required to meet the diverse needs of residents, particularly people with special needs. Existing programs such as Fire Ready Victoria and Community Fireguard will be enhanced, while new initiatives will be developed to increase individual and household capacity to live with fire.

Many Victorian businesses are exposed to the threat of bushfires and farmers, tourism operators and other workers need to consider fire as a serious workplace safety issue. Aside from safety concerns, fire can destroy essential assets, disrupt services and cause stress within the workplace. Strategies aimed at Victorian businesses and other enterprises will feature strongly in the *Living with Fire* programs.

All people visiting high fire risk areas need to be aware of the risks, understand their responsibilities, know how to avoid danger and know where to find important information about fires and fire safety. Initiatives directed at tourists and transient populations will feature targeted safety messages and be delivered through a variety of communication channels.



Communities

In addition to building the capacity of individuals to be safe from fire, it is recognised that communities as a whole need to be supported to reduce their vulnerability from the effects of fires. Bushfires can impact on critical infrastructure such as water, power and transport.

Community resilience is enhanced by encouraging civic participation in fire management decision-making, developing networks and social structures and by protecting important community assets.

Community partnerships are an essential feature underpinning *Living with Fire*, enabling agencies and communities to work together to develop appropriate solutions for issues of interest, such as the management of fire on public land.

Successful community partnerships rely on the sharing of information through open and effective two-way communication and offer genuine participatory opportunities to influence important decisions. Safety from fire and the protection of our environment are both highly complex and emotive issues and it is essential that all parties recognise the value of partnerships that foster mutual trust, respect and understanding.



GOAL TWO:

Build the resilience of communities by enabling active participation in fire management and promoting community networks and partnerships.

OBJECTIVES:

- To build community connectedness by actively supporting community networks in areas vulnerable to bushfire
- To promote community resilience by supporting communities to plan holistically for the impacts of fire on community resources, including built, economic, social, cultural and natural assets
- To empower people to actively seek opportunities to become involved in important social and environmental issues relating to fire management
- To support communities to recover from the impacts associated with bushfires and to continuously build resilience through the recovery process.

People are increasingly aware that they have both the right and the responsibility to get involved in issues that are important to them, such as the management of fire and the protection of people and property.

GOAL THREE:

Encourage communities to actively participate in planning for the use of fire as a process for creating a safer and more sustainable environment.

OBJECTIVES:

- To increase community acceptance of appropriate risk management practices such as planned burning and strategic fuel breaks to enhance the safety of people in Victoria and to protect critical assets and infrastructure
- To promote public understanding that planned burning can be a vital tool for reducing the severity of bushfire and achieving positive environmental outcomes
- To generate understanding that planned burning is a tool that can be used on both private and public land as an element of good land management
- To assist people to actively participate in the planning of burns for purposes of community and asset protection and ecological health.

STRATEGIES 2008 - 2012

Living with Fire places a strong emphasis on participatory involvement through community partnerships, by fostering well-connected communities, building skills and knowledge and offering opportunities for involvement in decision-making. It is well recognised that participatory involvement is essential in supporting attitudinal and behavioural change in adults and is therefore a vital tool in building community resilience.

The strategies under this theme focus on people affected by bushfires and planned burning, and the important social structures that are critical in supporting communities before, during and after fires. The strategies support increased civic participation, local ownership of issues and activism through improved community engagement, particularly through the Fire Operations Planning Process for public land. In addition, the strategies will better support communities to identify and strengthen the key resources that underpin their social structure and ensure these resources are protected from the effects of fire.



Environment

Victorians need to understand and accept that fire is a vital part of our natural environment that needs to be proactively managed on both private and public land. As climate change becomes an increasingly influential factor in the natural environment, the role of fire will become increasingly complex.

Many of Victoria's ecosystems need fire in order to survive and flourish and a complex pattern of fire ecology has evolved. Therefore, excluding fire from the landscape for long periods and over large areas threatens ecosystem health and leads to accumulation of heavy fuel loads resulting in large and ecologically damaging bushfires.

It is important for people to understand the process of fire management, which includes the prevention and suppression of fires as well as the use of planned burning, which can lessen the impact of bushfire and promote healthy ecosystems.

It is also vital for people to appreciate that both fire prevention activities and fire itself can affect people, plants and animals, impact on air and water quality and contribute to land degradation. Fire must therefore be managed in consideration of relevant environmental, social and economic factors in order to be sustainable.



GOAL FOUR:

Assist Victorian communities to understand and appreciate the role of fire in the environment and to accept and adopt ecologically sustainable fire management activities.

OBJECTIVES:

- To increase understanding and acceptance that fire plays a natural and essential role in the Australian environment
- To promote environmentally sustainable fire management principles and support the adoption of sustainable fire management practices on private and public land
- To promote the use of planned burning as a primary fire management tool



STRATEGIES 2008 - 2012

Key strategies will include community education and information programs to raise the level of public knowledge about the role of fire in the Victorian environment. Many of these activities will be targeted at the general public who have not been previously exposed to information about fire and do not have a clear understanding of the complexities of fire management in Victoria. These programs will aim to build community acceptance of the role of fire in the landscape and the need for planned burning, including the effects of smoke and other factors associated with planned burning and bushfires.

In addition, the strategies of *Living with Fire* will engage with people undertaking fire preparedness activities and encourage the adoption of sustainable practices, recognising that safety and environmental sustainability are not mutually exclusive.





OUR COMMITMENT

All partners of *Living with Fire* acknowledge that the public has a right to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Equally, the community needs to be supported to accept responsibility and be encouraged to become active participants in decision-making.

Living with Fire offers a strong commitment to the following principles relating to the design and delivery of community capacity building programs:

- To seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in decisions relating to fire
- To enable communities to be involved in developing opportunities for public participation
- To provide participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way
- To communicate about the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers
- To ensure transparency about when and how public participation is used to influence the decision-making process
- Communicate with participants about the decision-making process and its outcomes

CFA, DSE, DHS and MFB are committed to a community engagement approach to fire management, where the community is seen as an equal partner, with shared responsibilities and shared opportunities for decision-making.

In addition to the principles of effective community engagement, *Living with Fire* is committed to the philosophy of:

- Environmental sustainability – to protect our natural assets
- Risk management – to ensure resources are spent on the greatest needs
- Inclusiveness and equity – for all people in Victoria
- Continuous improvement – using evidence-based evaluation.

FRAMEWORK PARTNERS

Living with Fire is a joint initiative of the Victorian Government through CFA, DSE, DHS and MFB. These agencies will work in partnership with a range of other key stakeholders including:

- Department of Justice (DOJ)
- Office of Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC)
- Victoria Police
- Tourism Victoria
- State Emergency Services (SES)
- Environment Protection Agency (EPA)
- Department of Primary Industries (DPI)
- Parks Victoria
- VicRoads
- Municipal Association Victoria (MAV)
- Melbourne Water
- VicForests

Individual local governments also need to be engaged as active participants in the way fire is managed in Victoria.

Integrated Fire Management Planning (IFMP) is a Victorian government initiative to improve planning for all types of fires including structure, chemical and bushfires, while *Living with Fire* engages the community broadly about a range of issues relating to bushfires and planned burning. *Living with Fire* and *IFMP* are linked initiatives which will work hand-in-hand to foster partnerships to achieve better community safety outcomes and improve fire management in Victoria. Together, *IFMP* and *Living with Fire* contribute to a safer, more sustainable Victoria.