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CFA Post-Fire Qualitative Research:

A descriptive analysis of Community Fireguard Group members' experiences of the 2009 Victorian bushfires

Preliminary Report
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VicHealth

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Executive summary

This report is written for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission to provide an analysis of the impact of involvement in the CFA Community Fireguard Program on members' fire experiences on Saturday 7 February 2009 (Black Saturday). The report brings together major themes from focus group discussions with 47 members of seven Community Fireguard Groups in one of the fire-affected areas.

The bushfires varied in intensity and outcomes across the areas represented by the seven groups. These variations enable this report to capture a broad range of fire experiences: being away from properties at the time of the fire, evacuating late, and actively defending homes against the fires. The research participants told of many ways in which their Fireguard groups assisted them to prepare for the bushfires physically and psychologically. As a result, participants said that they had increased their chances of protection from fire, and as a consequence their chances of survival. For these groups, the Fireguard program achieved its objectives.

All groups experienced varying degrees of loss of property, and one had lost many of its members. The experience of the fire, while terrifying and at times mesmerizing, was described as manageable for those who survived: manageable because of the self efficacy and sense of control that they gained from the ways in which the CFA's training enabled them to focus on implementing tasks from their plans that proved essential for their survival. While these fires were clearly traumatic and distressing, participants had drawn on their experiences to refine their plans and preparedness for what they see as the inevitability of future fires. The contrast between the panic reaction of visitors without training and the focused, active response of Fireguard members post-training, is a testament to the merit of the program when it is being implemented as intended. An unanticipated, yet understandable, positive outcome of the program was the promotion of social connection in the majority of the groups

The analysis of participants' accounts support the view that the Community Fireguard Program should continue, but could be improved as follows:

- Ensuring that there is fidelity and consistent dose in the implementation of training by CFA at Fireguard groups so it can be demonstrated that all groups receive the same information
- Require more regular meetings for groups to ensure they receive all aspects of training and include practical components that apply theory and best practice to a review of members' properties and make specific plans based on the most robust evidence
- Consideration to developing a quality assurance process for plans developed within the groups using peer assessment and signed off by CFA
- Incorporate problem solving components into training to contextualize and translate knowledge translation of complex key messages: such as how to

plan to leave early, need for multiple fire plans, warnings, and active defence when sheltering indoors

- Wide promotion of a "plan for all possibilities" message to replace the current simplistic notion referred to in the media as "stay or go"
- Wide promotion of the Community Fireguard Program to achieve wider coverage of membership in communities
- Completion of training a condition of membership
- CFA guidelines and recommendations re: equipment standards – e.g. generator powered pumps, diesel fuel, CFA goggles.

In contrast to the strong support for the CFA and the Community Fireguard Program, there was a consistent expression of anger and betrayal across groups about what they saw as barriers by local councils that prevented general fire management, such as regular clearing of vegetation that comprised fire hazards. In addition, there were concerns about barriers to effective fire protection on private, Council and Crown land that participants said affected their individual and collective capacity to prepare and implement fire plans.

This research can be considered alongside the CFA report, "A review of the role of Community Fireguard in the 2009 Victorian bushfires: Interim report 2009", mapping fire outcomes for Fireguard and non-Fireguard homes to inform judgments about the Fireguard program's outcomes. It is likely that participants' responses reflected their current stage of recovery and response to the fire experience. Working for 12 months to two years time as part of an Action Research study would allow ongoing assessments of the implementation and reach of revised Fireguard program, understanding of factors impacting on the efficacy of the program at different stages of post-fire recovery and preparedness, and would contribute to ongoing improvements to the program, and thereby help to maximize the program's potential in increasing community safety.

Contents

Background

The purpose of this project is to collate detailed information and identify key themes on fire experiences from selected Community Fireguard Groups within the areas affected by fire on Saturday 7 February 2009 (Black Saturday). The Community Fireguard Groups are local resident groups established, trained and supported by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in fire preparedness. The Community Fireguard Program is a community development program designed to reduce the loss of lives and homes in bushfires. For the purposes of this report, the 'Community Fireguard Program' will be referred to as the 'Fireguard program' and 'Community Fireguard Groups' will be referred to as 'Fireguard groups' with members referred to as 'Fireguard' members. The Fireguard members participating in the research will be referred to as participants.

This research is being conducted as part of CFA's ongoing commitment to research and evaluation and will contribute to the CFA report to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Separate quantitative data has already been mapped by the CFA to show the fire outcomes for Fireguard members and non-members. A study of the experiences of Fireguard members using qualitative methods is the subject of this report. The information will be used to critically assess the value of the Fireguard program and highlight aspects of the program that worked, didn't work, or could be improved. Due to the tight deadlines of the Commission, this report has been prepared based on a preliminary, descriptive analysis of the data. A more detailed conceptual and theoretical analysis with consideration of the existing bushfire literature will be conducted over the ensuing months.

Research objectives

This study has addressed the proposition that active membership of fully trained Community Fireguard Groups reduces the likelihood of loss of property or life in the event of a bushfire. In particular it addresses the following objectives:
- Understand the experiences of Fireguard members during the February 09 bushfires
- Identify the capacity of Fireguard members to implement fire preparedness procedures in bushfires of varying intensity
- Identify what aspects of the Fireguard program worked, didn't work or could be improved in terms of increasing protection from fire

This research contributes to practical knowledge of whether, and how, the Fireguard program provides increased protection from bushfires when it is being implemented as intended. This will inform decision-making regarding bushfire policies, such as resident choice versus full evacuation.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. It was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee. It will be combined with a separate quantitative analysis conducted by the CFA to form a mixed method analysis of the Fireguard program.

Study sample

One bushfire affected region was selected by the CFA as a sample area for the evaluation. This region was selected because it had the highest density of impacted Fireguard groups. Groups were not considered eligible unless they had completed the CFA training. It was not considered useful to speak to groups that had not been trained, as the intention was to assess the influence of the Fireguard program when it is implemented as intended. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, these groups were not approached to participate unless they had responded to, or expressed willingness to, participate in a post-fire survey by the CFA, as this was considered as an indication that they were prepared to contribute to research. These groups were then categorized on the basis of high and medium fire intensity and high and medium loss (property and lives) as it was anticipated that these groups would provide a range of useful insights into Fireguard and fire experiences. Low fire intensity and low loss groups were excluded. This left 11 eligible groups. Classification was based on the following:

Fire severity	*(assessed from aerial photographs)*	
Excluded	0 Unburnt	No evidence of burning
Low green	1 Patchy	Evidence of burning but canopy intact and
Low green	2 Low	Ground burnt but canopy mostly intact and
Medium	3 Moderate	Some scorching (under 50%) mostly green
Medium	4 High	Mostly scorched (more than 50%)
High	5 Very high	Some canopy burnt/lost (under 50% burnt)
High	6 Extreme	Canopy mostly burnt/lost (more than 50%)

Loss (some initial reports inaccurate)	
Excluded	0 Not in impact zone
Low	1 In fire zone, no loss
Low	2 Some damage, no loss
Medium	3 Few houses lost (1-3, few)
Medium	4 Some houses lost (4-6, some)
High	5 Many houses lost (6+ most)
High	6 Severe impact - many houses lost plus fatalities

It was not possible to locate all of the eligible groups because of relocation of contact people and other members following the fires. Two of the groups invited to

participate in the research declined. Both had experienced medium fire intensity, one of which had experienced medium loss and the other low loss. One of the groups declined because they were not really an active group. The other declined because there was a low level of involvement in the group and existing members were tired and displaced. Focus group discussions were able to be arranged with six of the remaining eligible groups. One of these groups was subsequently re-categorised as a low intensity/low loss group but still provided useful insights. An additional two groups were invited to participate based on emerging themes from the analysis indicating that high loss and proximity of members' properties may influence their experience of the Fireguard program. One of these groups accepted the invitation to participate. The other group declined on the basis of members' ongoing distress. For the purposes of this research, members were considered as those who attend group meetings or who are listed on the "phone tree" (list of local members who are on a phone loop for communication regarding things such as meetings, total fire bans or in the event of a fire). All members of a participating Fireguard group were eligible to participate.

Recruitment

The CFA invited the selected Fireguard contact people to participate in the research and, if they were agreeable, a Plain Language Statement was sent to enable them to make an informed decision. All members of participating groups were provided with a plain language statement and consent form about the research, explaining the purpose of the work and the use of the data. In particular, they were instructed that the process was entirely voluntary and members were under no pressure to participate.

Data collection

Each focus group discussion took place in the home of one of the Fireguard members. Group discussions took between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. Meetings for the first six groups were held over one weekend and the final group was held on the following Friday evening. These were the times and venues selected by the groups as the most convenient. The focus group discussions were facilitated in pairs by a team of four University researchers. The discussions were recorded and notes were taken. The focus group discussions were semi-structured, guided by the following questions:

- First of all can you tell us about how you started as a group?
- Did you all know each other beforehand?
- How did your group operate?
- How do you think you will operate in future? Why?
- If necessary, use prompts like:
    - How did your involvement in the Community Fireguard Program affect your experience of the fires?

- *explore level of preparedness – get details*
  - Has your view of the Community Fireguard program changed as a result of your bushfire experiences?
  - Were there any unanticipated outcomes from your group membership?

A short demographic questionnaire was also circulated to capture the gender, age groups and level of training of participants.

Limitations and Strengths

CFA selection and recruitment of groups for participation in the research is a possible limitation as intentional or unintentional bias may have influenced the selection process. Similarly, it is possible that groups who declined to participate may have been feeling negative about the CFA and/or the Fireguard program, or that groups who did participate did not feel free to voice criticisms given that the research was commissioned by the CFA. However, the University researchers participated in the decision-making as objective contributors and the collection of both positive and negative feedback relating to the Fireguard program and fire experiences supports the neutrality and representativeness of the process.

The following research processes also support the quality and rigour of the research:
- Researcher triangulation – the four researchers were paired, so that two conducted each focus group discussion, followed immediately by debrief with the other pair and discussion of data and interpretations
- Discipline triangulation – the researchers represented a range of disciplines including psychology, public health, social work, policy and community service, evidence, and knowledge transfer. The contribution of these different perspectives supported debates about possible interpretations and implications of the findings. Further perspectives were provided with the CFA contribution to the interpretation of the data and accuracy of program and organisational details
- Data triangulation – the data collected from the focus group discussions was able to be checked against the CFA training modules and will subsequently be checked against the CFA survey to allow a multi-method assessment of the Fireguard program
- Theory triangulation – further analyses will compare the findings with current bushfire literature and social theory to develop a theoretical understanding of the Fireguard program which will have broader applications than the immediate context of the study.

Sample description

Separate focus group discussions were held with each of the 7 participating Fireguard groups, with a total of 47 participants. The Fireguard groups varied in terms of fire severity experienced and level of loss (Table 1).

Table 1: Categorisation of participating Fireguard groups

Fire severity	Level of loss (property/lives)		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	1		
Medium		1	
High	1	1	3

Four of the 7 groups had been together for 2 years, 2 groups had been operating for 3 years and 1 group had been operating for 12 years. In that time, the majority of participants had completed all of the CFA training sessions (see Table 2). The time since group formation indicates that six groups would have done the core program in its revised and standardised form and one group almost certainly has not. It should be noted that Table 2 provides an approximate guide only as it may be difficult for participants to distinguish between the different components of the Fireguard training program.

Table 2: Level of training of Fireguard members

Topics discussed	Group 10		Group 6		Group 3		Group 18		Group 15		Group 2		Group 11	
	Little	Lot	Little	Lot	Little	Lot	Little	Lot	Little	Lot	Little	Lot	Little	Lot
Fire Behaviour	4	10		4	1	3	1	2		7	2	4	4	5
Personal Survival	3	11		4		4		3	1	6	2	4	4	5
House Protection	2	12		4		4		3		7	2	4	6	3
Fire Preparedness plan	2	12		4		4		3		7	2	4	3	6
Total no. of participating members		**14**		**4**		**4**		**3**		**7**		**6**		**9**

The gender breakdown of participants was close to even across all groups (Figure 1) and the age range was weighted toward participants in the 41-55 years and the 55+ age groups (Figure 2).
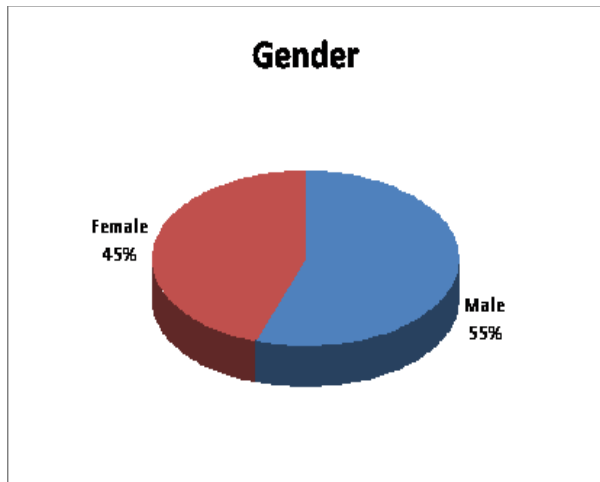

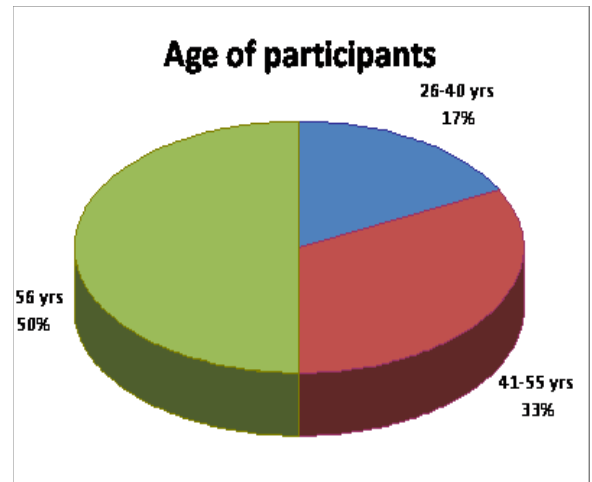**Figure 1: Gender breakdown of participants**

Figure 2: Age breakdown of participants

Data analysis

The initial coding, categorizing and descriptive analysis of the data was prepared by the researchers using an inductive, thematic approach. Patterns of issues and reported behaviours were noted within and across groups and categories. Confirming and disconfirming evidence was sought in the data to develop an understanding of the relationship between membership of Fireguard and experience of bushfires. A draft was then sent to the CFA members of the research team to assist with an accuracy check of program and organisational details, interpretation of the findings and feedback on the preliminary report prepared for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. Further analyses will then be conducted develop a more conceptual understanding of the Fireguard program and its impact on community safety. The findings will be compared with previous literature to develop both a practical and theoretical understanding of the role of the CFA Community Fireguard Program in the February 2009 fires and considerations for future applications of the program.

Reporting

All data collected in this study has been de-identified to protect the anonymity of the research participants. The findings have been presented in a format that will assist the CFA and the Royal Commission to access the findings relevant to assessment of the influence of the Fireguard program on participants' safety during the Black Saturday bushfires and potential future improvements of the program. There was variation in the terminology used by participants. Where possible this has been standardized to reduce confusion. For example, the term 'phone tree' has been used

throughout despite the fact that some groups refer to it as 'fire tree'. Similarly, references to the CFA may in some cases be actually referring to the role of the local Fire Brigades. The CFA is organized primarily on three levels. The general public may be most aware of local brigades, which are often staffed by volunteers and tend to have a strong operational (fire-fighting) focus. There may also be some awareness through the media of senior staff at CFA headquarters. Fireguard programs and other community safety programs are developed centrally but delivered by regions. Fireguard group members may know the CFA primarily through their relevant facilitator and/or coordinator, rather than local brigades.

This preliminary report will be submitted to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission to contribute to their deliberations. The final analysis of the data will be submitted to the CFA as a final report at the end of September 2009. The research findings will then be further disseminated through summary information for research participants, community forums, conference presentations and academic publications.

Preliminary Findings

Formation of Fireguard groups

Participants were generous in sharing their experiences of the Fireguard program and the bushfires in the focus group discussions. The participants were clear and articulate when describing their experiences and their perspective of the Fireguard program. The groups had evolved and were implemented in different ways. This was consistent with the community development model of the Fireguard program which allows for variations in implementation to suit the environment and membership of each group. Only one of the groups had been formed following a CFA meeting held in their street. Otherwise, the groups were self-initiated by one or two people with a particular interest in forming a Fireguard group. For one group this was driven by an awareness of the fire risk to their newly purchased property and an additional interest in getting to know their neighbours. Two other groups were formed by people who had experienced the 2006 bushfires and decided they needed to be better prepared next time. One group contact person described the 2006 fires as a traumatic experience: "I felt so alone… I panicked. I never wanted to feel like that again." Each of these group leaders contacted the CFA and followed the instructions to invite their neighbours to an initial group with a CFA facilitator present. The groups then progressed through the training and to ongoing seasonal meetings (commencing either just prior to the fire season or at the beginning of the season), combined with social activity. Some groups kept a record of members' plans, particularly in relation to whether they planned to leave early or stay and defend. One of the groups had a meeting only eight days prior to the fire for the benefit of new members and one of the couples reported that they only decided to attend this meeting because of the extreme weather conditions.

Despite significant variance in fire plan experience, the majority of participants across the groups reported the value of having a plan in place and of talking through their fire plans with each other during Fireguard meetings. For those who had attended more than one meeting, the meetings were also viewed as an opportunity to learn from each other about how to prepare their properties:

> *"We talked it through. We hadn't physically practiced it but we knew what we were going to do. We talked about what we would do and how we would do it."*

"Street Walk" – Property reviews

The current Fireguard program includes a "street walk" component which is a practical activity led by a CFA facilitator relating the theory to a resident's own property and circumstances. The availability of this component of the program is included in the documentation provided to group contact people. It is an opportunity to discuss specific strengths, weaknesses, risk factors and options relating to

members' properties such as "it would be difficult to defend your house against the forest right next to your house" or "if the fire starts next door and the road gets blocked – what will that mean for your plan to leave?". It does not include prescriptive assessment of individual plans. One group described this as a highlight of their CFA training three years ago, and others who had an informal visit from the CFA to review their property, also described it as being extremely useful. All of the groups, except one high loss group, suggested this service should be included in the Fireguard program in future but were all under the impression that this service was no longer available because of CFA concerns re: liability. This highlights that Fireguard groups are not receiving or aware of all of the training components available to them. Groups were so keen to get feedback on their individual properties that they proposed, and in some cases had implemented, performing this service for each other as a group, capitalizing on the group's knowledge and shared experience. The majority of participants noted that living through a fire had given them a heightened awareness of risk that enabled them to view properties and identify hazards readily now. It was also suggested by one participant that this process should include advice regarding garden plants which are less likely to fuel fires.

Social connections

The care and respect the participants had for each other during the focus group discussions were clearly evident. An unexpected outcome of Fireguard program involvement described by the participants was the social connections and friendships formed through the groups:

> "Getting to know each other has been really good, I found it a real ice breaker to get to know the neighbours… now we know a lot of people…"

> "One really positive outcome (of the Fireguard program) is that we have all become really good friends."

> "It (Community Fireguard Program) put me in much closer contact with my neighbours, who saved our lives… how much more valuable can it be?"

For other groups who did not have the same level of social cohesion there was evidence of connections developing following the experience of the fire. One of the high loss groups was an exception. They didn't even see themselves as a group before the fire and stated that they did not anticipate meeting again as a group because they felt they had learnt what was necessary by living through the fire. However, there was some discussion about individual participants getting together to process the paperwork, and for the women to have a 'girls' get together. Social connections within groups seemed to be more evident when the properties were on smaller blocks and were in close proximity to each other. The ideal size of groups was discussed by a few of the groups with the agreed number being people from approximately 12 properties. Where social connections developed prior to the fire, it

seemed to support the ongoing cohesion of the group, mutual support in preparation for fires and in some cases when defending against the fires. For example, four families congregated at one property at the peak of the fire to shelter in the purpose-built fire proof cellar:

> "The cellar was never part of anyone's fire plans. On the day of the fires I used the phone tree to ring around everyone and reminded them all that the cellar was there if they needed it… when people saw the flames they knew it was too big so they decided to come to our cellar… As it turned out we had 10 people, 6 big dogs, 2 cats in cages and 1 guinea pig in a box using it… The cellar is a purpose built fire shelter, it has a thick cement floor, a steel reinforced suspended slab as a roof, it's double brick with steel reinforced concrete in between, It has two entrances with steel doors which are insulated. The cellar is built under a fireproof shed."

They emerged when the front had passed and proceeded to protect their own homes and their neighbours' homes from the remaining fires. This social support also seemed to help with the recovery after the fires with neighbours checking on each other and reassuring each other they were still alive, sharing food and debriefing after the fire.

> "The fire has brought our street together, well our half of the street actually (the half where the group members resided), and it's been a good thing."

> "People in surviving houses have felt moved to bind people together".

One participant, whose property was a bit further away from the others, had to fight the fires on her own. She said with absolute conviction that she would have moved away after the fires if not for her 'Fireguard friends'.

> "If I hadn't had my Fireguard friends, I would have been off this mountain in a shot never ever to come back again… It's only my Fireguard friends that kept me here."

The other members were not aware she felt this way, i.e. they had not persuaded her to stay, but her sense of connection with them meant it was not worth leaving, despite the trauma experienced and the likelihood of fires in the future. However, these social connections also caused some distress because of the intense concern for neighbours when it seemed that they must have been engulfed by the fire, trauma when neighbours and families perished, and extreme guilt for those that escaped the fires and then felt that they had abandoned the group. Participants could often see one another's homes behind a wall of flames but couldn't help one another and had to operate as individuals.

There was also some evidence of participants caring for neighbours and other group members and thereby delaying their own preparation. For example, two group contact people abandoned the phone tree and rang all members individually. One

participant said that a friend of his didn't even know the fire was happening – a neighbour came to warn him, so he survived, but the neighbour then went back to his property and died.

It should be noted that while the social connections formed within the Fireguard groups were valued by participants, social cohesion did not seem to be essential to the impact and effectiveness of the training. This suggests that groups with low social cohesion would still benefit from the Fireguard program. In fact, one participant in a highly cohesive group whose plan was to leave early, spoke of the inherent pressure to choose to stay and defend in a group situation where the majority of the group members were electing to stay and defend. This seemed to arise through a sense of belonging and solidarity, not pressure from other members.

Social cohesion within the group may be less likely to occur in groups that are more spread due to the size or low proximity of members' properties. It should also be acknowledged that in some cases, the choice to live in rural properties reflects a desire to be less socially engaged. For example, in one group for which there was minimal evidence of social connection, they interpreted workers and visitors as 'intruders' to their land and noted that their privacy had been lost since the fires.

Unexpectedness of fire

A strong theme in participants' reports of the Black Saturday fires was the unexpectedness of the speed and intensity of the fires.

> *"…we were prepared enough for the fire we thought we were going to get…"*

Participants described the height of the fires as being 1.5 times higher again than the trees:

> *"I seen it in the sky first, … it was like the smoke was on fire and all the tops of the tree and it just jumped straight across, even our house and everythin' and it kept going and it was almost like you were in a snow dome or something. It was strange, like another world and then it came on the ground."*

This participant appeared well prepared with a well practiced plan, including house sprinklers and fire pump with a generator and weekly clearing of the property. He was ready to implement the recommended staged approach of putting out embers and spot fires, retreating inside when the fire front comes, then coming out and putting out spot fires, but was confused because this fire didn't follow the description of fires given in the CFA training:

> *"When the fire front came it didn't have any embers or stuff it was just fire front. When am I meant to go inside the house? I'd better just keep staying here and I just stayed out 'til the house blew up anyway."*

This participant survived by blasting the fire balls with water as they came at him, *"that took some of the sting out of it"*. He ended up in intensive care but appeared in good health at the focus group discussion.

Another group said they were prepared for a normal fire but not this. This group felt that the people who died were prepared for the fire but were overcome by its ferocity. Some participants in other groups also felt that they were lucky, that the intensity of the fire meant that being prepared wasn't always enough. They also said that advice given by the CFA through the Fireguard program saved lives. Another group said that they wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Fireguard program. This was echoed by the majority of groups, with the exception being the high loss group who had lost group members and their families in the fires.

Many of the groups were surprised by the fires coming from more than one direction and the major fire front coming from an unexpected direction. There were many accounts of participants monitoring the fires coming from one direction only to be taken by surprise as additional fires approached rapidly behind them. They were not expecting the fire even up until late afternoon, and were definitely not expecting a fire of such ferocity. There was no smoke or direct visual warning. This meant that many people had very little time to engage their fire plan. In some cases, the property was also set up to fight a fire coming from one direction but was less well protected if it came from the other. For example, on one property the fire pump was installed and ready on the corner of the property anticipated to be the last section of the property to be hit by the fires but instead the fire pump was the first thing to be destroyed. Many were also unprepared psychologically for the direction and speed of the fire. This meant that for some there was an initial experience of fear and indecision which was then replaced by a focus on their fire plan and their training.

Participants' readiness was also mediated by their expectations and interpretations of the available warnings. The CFA "Living in the Bush: Bushfire survival plan workbook" is provided to all Fireguard members. The first page of text states that "It is likely that the first sign of fire in your area will be smoke – or even flames near your property. Do not expect an official warning. You need to be alert, have a plan and be prepared to act independently on days of high fire risk." However, the groups discussed the need for an effective warning system to alert people of approaching fires. Some participants recognized the implications of the extreme weather reports, including the alerts that it would be the highest fire risk day ever experienced. However, one participant expressed anger that the numerical rating of the fire risk that far exceeded any previous risk rating was not communicated to the community and instead that "extreme fire risk" was used as the message, suggesting that this was not enough to convey the seriousness of the risk. This suggests that different representations of the risk message may be needed to cater to individual differences in learning, i.e. visual, verbal, numerical, although it may be difficult for some people to accept the reality of risk until they have experienced it themselves. Others

monitored the CFA website for warnings but were frustrated by the breakdown of this system. For some, there was anger about this failure particularly because their CFA facilitator instructed them to use this or the radio as the first indication of fire approaching. However, most acknowledged the extreme situation on the day and attributed the website failures to system overload. Others monitored the radio, in particular the ABC, which proved helpful for some areas and was frustratingly inaccurate in its reporting for others with commentators misreporting fire locations due to lack of local knowledge. Some participants felt that the ABC radio coverage tended to trivialise the dangers by retaining an entertainment format and by not giving out up to date local information. It was suggested that during a fire, all media should be interrupted to send warnings and establish a dedicated communication channel. The bushfire telephone hotline was also not useful on the day with too much time devoted to automated options and an extended privacy statement. One group recommended more localised fire information in future coming through radio, texts, and networks with other Fireguard groups. It was noted by another group that the ABC was much more effective in monitoring the fires in the week following Black Saturday because it announced all the text messages being received from community members reporting fires in their areas.

Some participants demonstrated the benefit of prior experience of bushfires by recognizing the signs of risk, spending the day patrolling and implementing their fire plan, and recognizing that when the first black embers started to fall, that the fire was approaching. Participants reported that the sight, sound and movement of the fires while faster and more intense, were consistent with what they had been taught in the CFA training and that this expectation made it possible to not be overcome by the experience. The size of the live embers was a surprise to many with lit branches as thick as a man's arm flying through the air and causing damage on impact. Almost all participants spoke of not being conscious of the heat despite the fact that it was a 47 degree day, they were wearing thick protective clothing, there was radiant heat from the fires, and they were working hard for long hours to actively defend against the fires. One participant also reported that she could not remember the roar of the fire and another had almost no memory of what happened after the fire arrived even though she was outside with her family for an extended period defending the house. These are standard physiological responses to life-threatening situations.

Change to fire plans

While the experiences of the fires varied, a common experience was that changed circumstances on the day meant that it was not possible to implement the fire plans as intended. For example, some participants were away from their home on the day of the fires at weddings, shopping, conferences, etc. There were also participants who planned to leave early but realized too late that the fire was approaching fast and it was no longer an option. One couple had shifted some belongings to a relative's house in the morning but disagreed on whether it was necessary to relocate themselves. As a result they were still in their home when the fire

approached at great speed. The husband spoke of his panic and indecision, eventually getting in the car and driving across a main road through dense smoke, aware of the high risk, to go to another participant's house to shelter in the fire shelter on their property:

> *"We stayed and stayed until it was clearly too late to leave… If we had to go any further than 200 metres across the road to here (neighbour's cellar) we clearly would have perished."*

His home was destroyed in the fires but his greatest frustration was that he didn't have the presence of mind to shift more things to the relatives' house on the morning of the fires. Another family also fled to a local house when they realised they couldn't get out, because they had known from previous contact that there was a bunker there and felt that they could go there. This highlights a common issue discussed in the groups about what is the definition of leaving early? Is it the day before an extreme weather day, the morning of all total fire ban days, or when there is warning of fire approaching? While it was recognized that on a day like Black Saturday the safe option would have been to leave the day before or in the morning, the impracticality of evacuating on all of the total fire ban days through summer [average is 10] makes it difficult. As noted by one of the participants, it is now clear that given the unpredictability of fires, those who plan to leave also need to have a plan and be prepared for the possibility that they will not have that option:

> *"People always say that they're going to leave. You've got to have a plan to leave **and** a plan to stay… You think it's a total fire ban day so you plan to leave but then you don't because it's not convenient or whatever so you've always got to have a plan to stay. That's why I'm against forced evacuations because people won't have a plan to stay."*

Visits from friends or relatives were another unplanned event that participants described when relaying their bushfire stories. In some cases this was helpful because it meant there were more adults present to assist in fighting the fires. However, as they had not gone through the training, some of the visitors panicked, representing a potential threat to all and requiring attention and care that could otherwise have been focused on defending against the fire.

The potential for circumstances to change and plans to become redundant is covered in the CFA training module, which suggests that members should have multiple plans to cover a range of scenarios. However, there was no evidence of this being translated to participants. The only participants who had multiple layers in their plans were those that had previous experience of bushfires and the different levels of plans allowed for pumps not working or similar equipment failures. This lack of translation of such an important component of the training could be a breakdown in the CFA train-the-trainer process, as the training is conducted by local CFA facilitators. Alternatively, it could indicate that there is a lot of material to absorb in the training and some of the more complex aspects are not always retained. This

would support greater emphasis of this aspect in the training, follow-up review of plans, and/or the promotion of annual refresher courses.

The simplified media translation of the message "stay or go" may also promote misunderstanding among bushfire residents. The need for multiple plans with different trigger points may need to be promoted to the media as well as within the training using a "Plan for all options" message. This would mean that even if you intend to go, you need to be prepared and trained to stay and defend if necessary. Planning for multiple scenarios should also include different plans for: weekdays, evenings or weekends; gender and the role (principally) of women in looking after children; times when all family members are not together; when people are not at home; or when people are visiting.

Children and the elderly

The involvement of children was also problematic. One woman had to leave to keep her children safe, because she could not help to defend the house and look after the children at the same time. Her husband got the family out by going to check if it was safe, then escorting her and the children out. He then went for water to save his livestock. This group reflected that it would have been better to have different plans for men and for women with responsibility for children.

Other parents planned to remove children from areas of danger but given the speed and spread of the fires this did not always work, and children ended up in situations of extreme danger. Once again, this reflects different understandings of triggers for decisions to leave early. These parents spoke of children panicking initially but coping when directed to a task; this included a panicked teenager settling when she was given the responsibility of calming her beloved six horses for hours during the fire while washing burning embers from their backs. Another young child was caught at home with her father when the plan had been to take the child to safety and have both parents present to fight the fire. The young child helped by doing tasks inside the house with the support of her mother and grandmother through the phone (the landline was still working). Another parent picked up his son and two of the son's friends to go to the perceived safety of his house only to have to all fight the fires together while the friends' house remained free of the fires. This parent had insisted his older teenagers attend some of the Fireguard meetings with him and although they had come reluctantly it meant they understood what he asked them to do on the day and they were able to keep focused despite their fear. This suggests it may be worth considering inclusion of children in Fireguard programs or developing child level resources for parents to share with their children. One group raised the role of schools in preparing children for bushfire risk. The participants also queried whether primary schools in bushfire affected areas were required to have fire plans. There is a Brigades in Schools program which covers house fire safety for young children and bushfire safety for older children. It is delivered by local Fire Brigades on request from schools but there is limited uptake. All schools in bushfire areas are meant to

have bushfire contingencies, but the extent of implementation and quality of the fire plans is not known.

Parent and grandparent participants also spoke about the ongoing impact of the fire experience on their children. One father noted that his 3 year old daughter spoke repeatedly about the fires for the following month. He was concerned about what impact it may have on her as she grew up. The father of a 16 year old daughter reported that she and friends with similar experiences had seemed fine until faced with the pressure of school exams. He felt that they did not get the level of understanding and support they needed from their schools at this time.

The elderly are another potentially vulnerable group. Fifty percent of the focus group participants participating in the research were >56 years of age. All of the participants over 70 had many years experience of living in bushfire affected areas and were active members of the Fireguard program. One older participant appeared unaware of the reality of risk and was fortunate to receive stranger assistance on the day of the fires but the rest of the older participants appeared to have actively and competently defended against the fires. One couple was twice removed from the property by authorities to protect them from risk even though they were prepared to defend. One of the older men in another group who had defended his home against the fires suggested that it may be necessary for older people to be assessed for competence with regard to their capacity to stay and defend their property. Despite his own success in protecting his property he acknowledged that there is a point at which ageing reduces capacity and it is often difficult to recognize or acknowledge to yourself that this point has been reached.

Luck

A common reference in the focus group discussions was to luck. Many attributed their survival and the survival of their home to luck, noting that they could have done everything they did and still suffered the fate of others. There is no question that there were some inexplicable outcomes from the fire and that timing of wind direction and the variable movements of the fire resulted in inconsistent outcomes. One couple in their neighbourhood just sat on the verandah unaware of the fire behind them until it passed by on both sides of the house– they were described as being lucky. One group said it was lucky it was a Saturday so that they were there to carry out their plans. This reference to luck often seemed to arise from a sense of solidarity with all who had experienced the fires and a reluctance to claim any credit because of concern it would discredit those who had experienced loss of property or lives. Some participants discussed they interplay between training, choices and luck. One participant noted that advice from the CFA to have a wet towel saved his life. Another participant said a wet towel was important for him but his wife did not use one and was admitted to intensive care suffering severe smoke inhalation. Another participant noted that:

> *"…we were prepared, but we also had a huge amount of luck – but we also had the resources and knowledge to make use of that luck…once the fire had gone through we knew what to do in terms of putting out the spot fires and managing all of that…being able to make use of that because of the knowledge through Fireguard group."*

Benefits of experience

One of the participants, who had minimal training, had lost his newly built home completed only weeks before the fire. He had planned to stay and defend despite the fact that the amount of trees on the site made it difficult to defend. His family eventually persuaded him to leave but he felt that a person's decision to stay or leave is driven primarily by the level of their emotional attachment to the house. This was not consistent with other reports of decisions being based on level of preparedness including one couple who had evacuated in readiness for all previous potential fires but felt this time that they had reached a level of preparedness that made it possible to stay and defend.

The experience of the fire seemed to provide people with more certainty on how to manage "next time". It has already been noted that the experience of the 2006 fires had alerted some people to their need for more training. For others it had given them the expectation that there would be plenty of warning of a fire approaching because those fires had moved more slowly. This had contributed to their shock at the sudden arrival of the recent fires. Participants who had planned to stay for the 2009 fires indicated that they now had a clearer sense of what was needed, and had already purchased equipment and made changes to the house and fencing, in readiness. "*Seeing the whole thing happen, heaps of things I wouldn't have around me house now.*"

One man who had always planned to leave with horses had realized that there was nowhere that he could take them and had to stay and defend despite being unprepared. He had resolved to be fire prepared in future and had removed an elaborate garden which previous owners had taken 20 years to develop. He was planning on replacing it with a native garden with cleared area around the house instead of trees and low shrubs. Others noted wryly that the fire had at least removed some trees and vegetation near the house and so would increase safety for a while. One man who had sought shelter in a neighbours' cellar, and had lost his house, seemed quite calm about the prospect of another fire, clear that his plan would be to shelter once again in the neighbours' cellar. He didn't even feel that ongoing meetings were necessary. Similarly, those who had experienced the most severe fire conditions seemed to feel that they had learnt what they needed from living through the reality of fire and did not need a Fireguard program. Others felt that the group had benefited them so much they were even more committed to group activities and felt they should be increased and extended. For example, one participant suggested it would be useful to assess each others' properties to get feedback on their fire preparedness efforts. Participants were already sharing

information about useful equipment and how to deal with insurance and other paperwork issues. While the experience of fire appeared to promote preparedness it is also possible that specific experiences could lead people to dismiss normally effective procedures or adopt inappropriate procedures. It would be useful if there was a debrief process in the Fireguard program to address this possibility before views are solidified.

Preparedness

Two participants noted that they chose to live in the area and part of their choice may mean being affected by bushfires. All participants who intended to stay and defend their properties had prepared in advance for the fires. This varied across the individuals and properties but seemed to include at the very least: a fire plan, regular clearing of vegetation and debris around the house and in the gutters (although in some cases this was redundant because the strong winds ahead of the fire dumped new leaves and debris). Many also had a box packed with thick fire protective clothing and plenty of buckets and mops. Others had purchased items such as CFA goggles, masks, and backpacks with squirters, and many had gone to considerably more expense and purchased equipment such as fire pumps, water tanks, fire hoses, and generators.

The group for the most part was very prepared with lots of equipment and plans and they executed their plans as best they could. There was a strong sense that they were ready to fight and able to function under pressure. In a group in which participants had not completed their training, some of the newer members appeared to have lower levels of preparedness and confusion about some of the central messages. *"It's not really training is it? For me, I didn't know anything. I didn't know what to do."* Conversely, the longer term members had developed and practiced plans.

Participants spoke of the benefit of the CFA training in giving them a sense of what equipment was needed and what constituted fire preparedness.

> *"If we hadn't had the Fireguard experience we would have been in serious trouble because – we didn't know anything…"*

They were a little frustrated that the CFA was not prepared to recommend specific items but spoke of the benefit of hints about things like protective clothing, goggles to protect eyes and wet cloths over the mouth and nose to prevent burning of the throat. The degree of participants' implementation of fire preparedness procedures seemed to be primarily influenced by the extent of prior experience of fires and understanding of the reality and nature of risk. However, it was also acknowledged by participants from one group that less active members were likely to be hampered by greater immediate priorities such as young babies, or difficulties in meeting the

costs of fire safety improvements. This came up in a few of the groups and one participant who lost his house and sheds explained, "I knew what I needed. Due to financial restrictions I didn't have what I needed." Another group described how preparedness builds up over a long period with members working together and improving their properties over a number of years, doing things gradually when they could afford to. Similarly, one group argued that Fireguard groups are dependent on members having the resources to pay for fire protection modifications and equipment. Not everyone can do that or afford to pay for things and some things can't be bought easily. They suggested an entrepreneurial role for the CFA, who could recommend or sell approved clothing and protective gear. The CFA training material does suggest that as an additional activity, groups can organize bulk buying of personal protective clothing and equipment. There was no evidence that any of the groups had tried this or were aware of this option.

Training also helped participants to know what to expect when a fire came in terms of the noise, darkness and movements of the fire. This preparedness helped to reduce the shock when it arrived and allowed participants to shift their focus on to the tasks they knew they had to do at each stage of the fire. While all participants seemed to have a clear plan prior to the fire, only some participants actually practiced necessary actions such as starting pumps, attaching hoses and even taking dogs into shelters. The importance of practice drills became obvious when participants described the huge, ongoing roar of the fire and the darkness so intense that it wasn't possible to see your hand in front of your face. The inability to think straight in the physical and emotional stress of the moment was also anticipated and described by participants – "when I had no air and was stuck on the fence if you'd said what 10 plus 5 was, I wouldn't have been able to answer." One participant described going into her house for a short breather, taking her goggles off for a moment and then not being able to find them again before going back out. Her eyes were red and streaming for weeks after the fire. It was suggested by one group that future training should included hands-on components and talking to others about their experiences of fire.

From the perspective of participants, the greatest benefit of the program was the psychological preparedness it provided. Understanding of what to expect, a plan of action, and a sense of self efficacy in relation to that plan helped participants to stay calm enough to be able to concentrate on the necessary tasks. Existence of a clear plan also minimized the amount of decision-making required when under extreme stress. Those that did describe moments of panic were in situations where a decision needed to be made due to changed circumstances. Participants did not support media suggestions of a forced evacuation policy. Arguments against it included that it: would cause anger among residents, both for regular false alarms and when fire actually comes and they can't defend their properties; would be impossible to implement; would invite litigation following loss of property; and would endanger lives because the tree-lined roads are more dangerous than prepared properties. For example, a family from one group was not home on the day of the fires and had lost their home. They felt it was definitely defensible if they had stayed. It was a clear block, and had English trees that survived the fire. They felt ember attacks had taken

their house. Participants from this group agreed that if you're not home, you've got no chance of saving your property.

Among the groups consulted there were many examples given of how the Fireguard program had assisted people to prepare for the bushfires physically and psychologically and in doing so increased their protection from fire and likelihood of survival. In this respect the program had achieved its objectives.

This participant was the only one in this group discussion whose house had been saved:

> *"The group's useful for more than just the phone tree. Just knowing other people on the street and knowing their phone numbers for example. I could phone (Fireguard group contact person) on the day and say do you know anything about the fire? But also the videos, I'm from (another country) so I didn't don't know anything about it, didn't learn anything about bushfires at school …Get some information about it, know what to expect to a certain extent. I know it wasn't what we expected but having that bit of knowledge helped. For us it did, I know we've still obviously got our house so it's a bit different for us than a lot of people. For us it worked…I don't know whether it's coincidence or just circumstances but the people that died on this street were not members of the group."*

Effective group operation

Groups seemed to operate most efficiently when the majority of members were active and were on properties in close proximity to each other. Inactive members were considered to be those who did not complete training or attend meetings but remained on the phone tree. It was suggested by individual participants from two groups that group membership should be contingent upon active membership and presence at meetings. Inactive members could actually represent a risk to other members because of failure to follow phone tree procedure. All groups had a phone tree in place, even those that did not exhibit any social cohesion. The phone tree appeared to be useful as a communication system for the group. Groups used it in different ways, but usually to arrange meetings and to notify others when they were leaving early; e.g. the day before or morning of Total Fire Bans, and for one group whose phones continued to operate, they rang one another during the fire and rang their CFA contact. However, the phone tree did not appear to be working effectively in its intended form. Non-active members could slow or stop the phone tree. In one group the contact person had decided to ring all members directly to tell them to implement their fire plan instead of relying on the phone tree. His efforts were hampered by one inactive member quizzing him about his sources of information. Fifteen minutes later the fire arrived. Participants from two other groups reported that they were phoned by a friend in an adjacent town to warn them of fire

approaching. They found it hard to believe at first because there was no sign of it approaching. In one group these warnings were used to activate the phone tree. The phone tree did not reach all members, because once the fire was imminent or had arrived, the phone tree could not be used to any effect. This was because members were preoccupied with implementing their fire plan, or the phone systems failed. One group reported that they had been trained that the Group contact person would be contacted by the regional CFA contact and notified when it was time for members to implement their fire plans. Some participants delayed implementing their plan, waiting for that call:

> *"The CFA was going to notify the head of the group and my recollection is they never called. The message in the back of your head is (the fireguard group contact person) hasn't rang me or the fire tree person hasn't rang me, so maybe we're okay."*

> *"I'll tell you something, it's not a positive thing though. I really feel like on the day the CFA failed us in the worst possible way because I took on this role fully expecting that they were going to give me the information if we ever needed to evacuate and we never got it. …We still need to go on as a group but I don't feel like I could ever trust the CFA for information again. I think we've just got to do what we were doing before and we've got a scanner, we've all got the internet, still got a fire pump, sprinkler system, do all that. If they give us information good but I'm not going to rely on them ever again."*

One of the participants from this group suggested it would be helpful if the CFA were able to implement an automatic recorded warning message from CFA to members' phone lines when fires were approaching their area. Another experienced participant from the group reported that he activated his fire plan early, based on the conditions of the day. He and his wife never intended to rely on the phone tree because they were at the end of the list and it had never got all the way through to them when it was practiced.

Non-members

A number of groups were concerned about how to prevent complacency and apathy about fire dangers, especially from people who were not involved in the program, or only involved peripherally. Some participants suggested that although the CFA message is that we are responsible only for our own property and lives, the preparedness and fire behaviour of non-members had a direct impact on the neighbouring properties of active members of Fireguard groups. Conversely, two groups noted how the efforts of participants to save their own property also saved some of their neighbour's land and in another case prevented the likely spread of the fire to other nearby houses. One group suggested that the Fireguard training should be compulsory for all people living in high fire danger areas and that this training be refreshed annually with existing groups. Compulsory insurance was also

recommended in one discussion. Participants spoke of having insurance but in some cases where homes were lost, discovering they were under-insured.

One group argued that the operation of their group, particularly recruiting, would be helped by general public relations and visibility about the Fireguard program. The group suggested that as new people moved into outer suburban areas they too could be in danger from fire and could benefit from a Fireguard program. Another group recommended that Fireguard members visit new owners so that when someone moves in they get informed of bushfires and the group.

> *"It really comes down to the individuals… no-one has the ability to say to anybody else 'hey you've got to do this' and people act as individuals – so we come back to a core of people that are interested and in between our properties there can be two or three others who are not interested at all which disturbs all the flow, so it comes down to mutual cooperation between people who basically get on and if we talk about a Community Fireguard Group of 27 to me that's absolutely ridiculous because you don't have 27 cooperating families… it needs to be 5 or 6 families…linked properties…that way you could save a lot more that needs to be saved…"*

Leave early policy

The concept of "leave early" did not seem well understood by many of the participants or to be followed according to program guidelines. None of the participants who had planned to leave, had left early on the morning of Black Saturday and some others who had planned to stay, decided to leave immediately before the fire arrived, in some cases because of advice from CFA officers about its size and intensity. While some understood that the recommended option was to leave on the morning of Total Fire Ban days, it was noted by participants of a few groups that this was impractical because of the number of false alarms. One high loss group noted that some group members who died usually left their house on bad days and went to town, but on this day they didn't.

One couple had removed all of their valuables for the summer in preparation. However, most participants said there are only so many times you can be prepared – leave the town, stay in the city, go to town, etc, because there had been eight days of extreme warnings. They wondered how many times you can prepare before becoming complacent, and said they cannot abandon life for six or seven days because it is impractical. Although they used the terms "complacency" and "apathy", it was not in a dismissive or blaming sense, but more linked to practicality. As a result there was often not enough planning around how and when to leave, resulting in last minute decisions to leave when the fire was imminent and in response to the ferocity of the fires:

> *"I rang 000 four times, couldn't get through and I just thought well I just got to get out of here… our plan was to stay and defend but then I just had a feeling I had to go and I left… I had plans to go to (friend's house in next*

town). I never got there because the fire front was there, it was right across both sides of the road and in the bush, as far as the eye could see, it was from the ground to the sky, all the flames, and I didn't see smoke… I saw flames from the ground to the sky, they were huge. I had to do a U-turn and go the other way. I put the accelerator down as hard as I could."

One group also noted the importance of councils maintaining exit roads that were safe for departures such as these.

Safe in houses

One high loss group commented on the CFA training video that stated that you will be safe in your homes. They suggested that in a fire of this intensity, greater than previously experienced, this is no longer true.

> *"The problem with the video the gentleman showed us was that people were safe in their houses and that was one of their key elements – people were safe in their houses. You go inside, you will be safe… until it passes, you will be safe… Now Victoria and the world hasn't seen what we saw on that day and that brought the bar from here (low) to here (high… put the embers out before the fire comes, then go inside when the radiant heat comes, you then go outside to put out whatever else was burning… That was their main drive… People that stayed in their houses didn't come out because they were incinerated."*

There was real concern in this group that a central message of the CFA training was inaccurate for such high fire intensity. However, they didn't believe there was anything else that could replace it. There was no mention in this group of actively defending versus passive sheltering while inside the house. It is possible that this hadn't come through clearly in the training or was part of the training missed by the new members in this group. There is no evidence yet on whether those that died in their homes on Black Saturday were actively defending or not.

Fireguard program improvements

Some participant suggestions for improving the Fireguard program, not included elsewhere, were:
- Hands-on practical training, demonstrations and opportunities to hear the experiences of people that have been through it
- Formal links with other Fireguard groups to share ideas and warn about approaching fires
- Incentives for active Fireguard membership such as insurance or tax rebates
- A more formalised peer 'audit' system of fire plans using quality assurance type checklists.

It was also suggested that there is a window of opportunity to change.

> *"I think while this Royal Commission's going on, while you can still see burnt trees… while people are still putting fences u… everyone's aware of it. The minute those traces disappear – forget it."*

Role of authorities

The CFA "Community Fireguard Guidelines for Groups" handout begins with the following statement:

> "CFA cannot provide every person and home with individual protection during a major bushfire and recognizes that many people may have to face a fire without the support of CFA. Bushfires are survivable if people take responsibility for their fire safety and prepare themselves for the event of a bushfire in their area."

There was widespread recognition across Fireguard groups of individual responsibility for plans, property and lives. There was also disappointment among some participants due to a perception that local Councils, the CFA and other authorities were not supporting their efforts, and that the capacity of Fireguard members to implement their fire plans and recovery was affected by the lack of fire warnings, poor preparation for fires by local councils, and poor management of fire situations by representatives of the CFA, police, army and other support services. Examples of concerns raised are detailed below.

Participants could recall the use of the local CFA fire alarm in previous years as an effective warning system of approaching fires, but this was not used now. The CFA website failed to provide adequate information and warning about the Black Saturday fires. In some cases, fires experienced by members didn't appear on the website at all. One participant suggested that relying on technology had made communication worse, not better.

While the majority of participants were aware that the CFA truck would not be coming during the fires and that they were on their own, others expressed strong disappointment about the lack of visibility of the CFA during the bushfire. Participants noted that there are limited numbers of CFA fire trucks available and those that were patrolling were waiting at length in some cases for instructions and were not able to enter any areas without adequate access. Two high loss groups described various encounters with authorities in the lead up to the fires suggesting they should leave. In one case the participant still decided to stay and defend. He lost his house but survived himself after a period in intensive care. Another participant described how the warning caused him to change his mind and leave instead of staying to defend:

> *"I just come back from the dam to look after the pumps… and he said "What the hell are you doing?" "What do you think mate, I've got a fire plan."*
> *"Mate, to tell you the truth we don't have the vehicles, nor the manpower nor anything to help you here. If you stay, be aware that you are by yourself. We're going now"*

The participant decided to leave after this encounter. One high loss group noted that both the CFA and police had a strong presence on the day which was very valued. In another Fireguard group several participants recounted an incident with the local CFA truck during the bushfire which impacted on them psychologically during the bushfire. These participants describe working hard to defend their properties and then, to their relief, seeing the CFA truck arrive in their street, "Help is here – good we have got some help". But the truck left again without stopping. One participant described the despair she felt at this point:

> *"We didn't expect the fire brigade to come and save us… But then when you see them coming and then they go the other way without stopping… It's the psychological impact… it's about the only time I sat on the ground and sobbed and thought this can't be happening…"*

Conversely, a man from another group who eventually lost his newly built home described how the CFA came when a fire started in the gully on his property. When they looked at it they said, "We can't do anything about that", so they moved back across the road and saved someone else's house. He seemed to understand that was necessary and accepted it.

There was a feeling that the level of training and staffing in CFA regional headquarters is insufficient for what is needed in these sorts of emergency but to have everything needed to do it right may not be feasible. One participant with military training suggested that CFA would need many hundreds of people, not three or four.

The scanner was described by two groups as a useful tool to get a notion of fire severity from CFA traffic – tune into frequency of emergency services to keep updated on what's going on. One of these groups also suggested that what was needed was one person in charge in the lead up to possible fires to make sure that people and organisations are working together - a 'Super power' for bushfires. They also suggested they be supported by a Futurologist for future preparedness, capitalising on links to climate change.

Part of the bad feeling of participants arose from the attitude of CFA volunteers and support services during and after the fire. While one of the CFA drivers appeared "anguished" that he couldn't enter a dangerous area to help, some other young volunteers ignored an old couple calling and waving to them for help and they barely acknowledged the owner of a property from which they were draining water from the dam. Similarly, another group described hearing about the CFA stopping at a property immediately after the fires where an old man sat head in hands in a state of

exhaustion. The CFA volunteers called out to see if he was dead. When he lifted his head in response they left without providing any help or supplies. It was suggested that training of CFA volunteers in customer relations would help to manage the impact on community members when the CFA is unable to provide active support.

One group also described being disgusted by soldiers in an army vehicle "hooning" up and down the road the day after the fires, trying out their new vehicle on the uneven terrain but not offering help to anyone. Similarly, the CFA were criticized for leaving food rubbish, bottles and wrappings on properties when based there for clean up. However, participants also reported that the Recovery Centre had been very good and volunteers who came to properties and helped clean up were valued and saved months of individual work: for example, removing fences and wiring that would have taken weeks, but was done in half a day

There was definite support for the CFA among the participants and concern that they not be made the scapegoat in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

> *"If you've got a 46 degrees day with howling winds there is nothing that we have seen previously and that's why I'd say I'm certainly not critical of the CFA in any fashion at all… it really was… on that day common sense should have said if there's going to be a fire God only knows how big it's going to be…"*

> *"The impression I'm getting… is they're looking for a scapegoat and the CFA is the scapegoat… and that's not fair or right… it's a volunteer organisation who did the best they could on the day."*

> *"…and they've done a brilliant job"*

One group insisted that we record how much they valued the CFA, understood its constraints of resources and policy and would like to see the CFA have more resources and control.

For one group, a strong topic of discussion was their feelings about the contribution of the local council to the experience of the fire. They said they were appalled because it was difficult to get water to prepare for or fight the fire for fear of prosecution and heard that council did not make valuable equipment available on the Saturday that could have helped with the fire. Another group was relieved that mains water pressure had continued throughout the fire.

One family described having to beg for water off people after the fire and having no information for a week; and yet, when authorities visited the property no-one brought them food or water or took their names so that they could be removed from the missing lists. This was a particular problem because of ongoing communication problems and road blocks preventing contact with families.

Difficulties in getting past roadblocks was described by participants in many of the groups. Some used local knowledge of back roads to bypass them or persuasion to

get through. One high loss group was particularly angry and distressed when they were unable to return to their property to take care of livestock and yet convoys of media vehicles were being waved through.

One thing that participants from low loss groups did report as helpful was the post-fire debrief from the CFA, particularly the learnings about the influence of local topography on fire behaviour. Participants suggested that this should be part of the core program.

There was community awareness and frustration at the ongoing communication difficulties and tensions between the CFA and DSE. It was suggested by one participant that this had led to delays in information flow and response regarding fire direction and speed. It was suggested that new technologies could be developed to enhance communication flow and prevent overload or breakdown on days of major bushfires. There was a focus in recommendations from groups on strategic and synergistic working across organisations. One participant noted:

> "…islands of power… New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, we're not Australia and it's like Victoria is not Victoria, Victoria is DSE, Victoria is CFA, Victoria is police, Victoria is all these pockets and none of the blend into each other and none of them work for the common cause of common sense."

There was also anger and frustration, particularly in the high loss groups, that local government environment policy and regulations had led to fuel build up and limitations for clearing trees around and on properties prior to the fires:

> "…council are absolutely so negligent and criminal in their actions of what they have done over the years, we want to live in the bush… we have no bush now."

Participants believed that there needs to be a balance between the needs of wildlife and the safety of people living in these areas. These policies had not changed since the fires and were affecting rebuilding and preparation for next year's bushfire season. One group felt that the Council should be held accountable for their role in loss of life and property. There were reports of confusion and frustration at poor maintenance of fire tracks, failure to keep exits and exit roads clear, and the removal of community fire refuges. Participants believed that removal of refuges was because local government was unable to declare anywhere safe but saw that this had left people and animals milling around in confusion. After deciding to leave early they were left with nowhere to go and no support services. One man reported that in the immediate period after the fires people started to arrive outside his fence because they had been directed to camp on a cleared area of his property. This had not been discussed or communicated to him. Nevertheless, he cut a section of his fence down to provide them with access.

Further comments from participants regarding the role of government included references to regulations about water tanks. Properties in rural areas are required to

have water tanks of 50,000 litres, with 10,000 litres of this capacity available for firefighting. However, this is not monitored. One participant suggested that the government should donate water to homes in fire risk areas just prior to fire season. It was also noted by the same group that the water tanks come with a special outlet for CFA connection but do not fit home based fire fighting equipment. This means that homeowners are unable to access their own tank water for their own firefighting, despite the fact that the CFA policy is that property protection is the homeowners' responsibility.

Summary

The dominant sense in the discussions with Fireguard members was that preparedness was about individual choice and responsibility and in this they had utilised their CFA training and were for the most part conscious and appreciative of the benefits provided by the training both physically and psychologically when the fires came through. The intensity and speed of the fires was clearly terrifying, and at times mesmerizing, but was described as manageable for those who had survived: manageable because of the self efficacy and sense of control that they gained from the ways in which the CFA Fireguard training enabled them to focus on implementing tasks from their plans that proved essential for their survival. While these fires were traumatic and distressing, participants drew on their experiences to refine their plans and preparedness for what they see as the inevitability of future fires. Particular aspects of the training such as 'street walk' property reviews and the need for plans to cover multiple scenarios, including triggers for leaving early, did not seem to be translated effectively to participants. In-program translation of these messages needs to be reviewed to ensure active Fireguard members get the full benefit of the program. Wide promotion of the program and the central messages are also likely to maximise the potential for reducing loss of lives and homes in bushfires.

However, strong messages coming through the group discussion about system failures cannot be ignored. While this officially falls outside of the Fireguard program the members form a significant stakeholder group with valuable knowledge and experience of the effectiveness of CFA/government/agency efforts in relation to fire preparedness and fire operations. The extreme conditions of Black Saturday only serve to highlight gaps and deficiencies in the systems and provide an opportunity to build on this knowledge to support improvements that will protect community and environmental outcomes.