

Chapter 1

Interface (urban–rural fringe) bushfire community safety

John Handmer and Katharine Haynes

The aim of this book is to present an accessible collection of bushfire research dedicated to community safety, being undertaken within the Australian Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre (CRC). The work is mostly undertaken by researchers from the social sciences and humanities, including economics and law. As far as we know, this is the first collection of research work on bushfire from these disciplines. The volume complements the very extensive published material on bushfires from ecology, fire behaviour, information management and related areas. It is an interim report on our research to date.

Our approach is to present the work in a way that is accessible to those responsible for bushfire risk management. This has guided our approach in obtaining feedback on each chapter from practitioners and in how the material is presented – as set out in the Acknowledgments. The research and review of the material for publication has been undertaken entirely in Australia. However, much of the material is generic in that it is likely to be relevant and useful to those dealing with bushfire community safety in other parts of the world.

We follow Australian practice in using the term ‘bushfire’, regarding it as synonymous with ‘wildfire’, ‘forest fire’ and so on as far as community safety is concerned.

History of the Bushfire CRC and development of the research themes

The Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) idea was developed in Australia in the early 1990s as a way to improve the uptake and application of research results. The idea is that bringing research providers and users together in one organisation means that research will be guided by the needs of users, who will have a stake in the research and therefore be more likely to adopt it. Most CRCs are commercial in nature, but the Bushfire CRC is largely a public-good corporation. With 34 agencies and research providers (universities and CSIRO) and over \$100 million of resources during the funding term of 2003–10, both cash and in-kind, the Bushfire CRC is relatively large in CRC terms.

The research reported in this volume comes primarily from one of the CRC’s four research programs – Program C: ‘Self-sufficient communities’.

Even before the Bushfire CRC, fire research in Australia was quite well-known locally and internationally. It was undertaken mostly by CSIRO and some very well-known fire scientists, but uncertain funding and an ageing cohort appeared to be leading to declining research capacity. Although the fire and emergency sectors had some very large agencies there was little in the way of a research culture, dedicated research budgets were small and mechanisms for dissemination and adoption of new research were largely ad hoc. The Australian fire industry lacked a unified approach to research, although it was developing common approaches to issues through its relatively new industry body, the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC).