

## Chapter 3

# Resilience at the urban interface

## The Community Fire Unit approach

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### Chapter summary

Community Fire Unit (CFU) initiatives in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory are increasing in popularity and cost. This unprecedented approach requires detailed analysis in order to quantify its effectiveness in achieving key community bushfire safety goals and to gain an idea of the likely challenges as numbers grow and new issues arise.

An assessment was carried out utilising a range of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the breadth of which was intended to provide a robust and objective set of results from which key issues could be identified and discussed. Data have been compiled from 20 agency interviews, 670 CFU member questionnaires, 50 public questionnaires and four focus groups. The issues discussed in this chapter are led primarily by the findings of the survey and focus groups.

The research identified an overall sense of empowerment, increased capability and social capital among individuals involved in the CFU program. The training and equipment were particularly valued as they boosted confidence and created more of an active and co-operative role for groups intending to stay and defend their homes from bushfire. However, it was also found that a minority of CFU members tended to focus too sharply on their operational role, leaving gaps in their wider preparation and planning. In addition, the strong community links within the CFU movement were identified as having a potentially negative influence on wider community relations, preparedness and communications.

It is hoped that this research will not only advance the CFU program but also be relevant to everyone involved with promoting community resilience.

### Introduction

The vulnerability of urban interface communities to bushfire is at an all-time high. Reductions in prescribed burns, the consequent build-up of fuel loads and an increasing desire to live close to the bush cause problems for fire authorities. Add to this predictions of longer and drier fire seasons in the future and it becomes clear that high-consequence events are likely to become more frequent and more intense (Pitman et al. in press). In a situation in which environmental, social and physical factors conspire to seriously threaten lives and property, such as in Canberra in 2003, current resources and levels of preparedness in interface areas are clearly not enough to cope with the demands created by such events.

Since the first UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (WCNDR) there has been a drive towards increased preparation and resilience rather than response and recovery. This was reiterated at the WCNDR in January 2005 in the Hyogo guidelines for disaster-