

Chapter 6

Prepare, stay and defend or leave early

Evidence for the Australian approach

Amalie Tibbits, John Handmer, Katharine Haynes, Tom Lowe and Joshua Whittaker

Chapter summary

This chapter provides an outline and overview of current research into the Australian ‘prepare, stay and defend or leave early’ policy. Although historical and structural evidence have been reported elsewhere, this chapter brings these issues together with additional verification from an analysis of a bushfire fatality database and findings from recent research into implementation.

The methodologies employed for this research include documentary analysis and extensive literature reviews, statistical analysis of bushfire fatalities, and numerous interviews, focus groups and quantitative surveys with members of the public and fire agencies before and after significant bushfire events.

This investigation demonstrates that the ‘prepare, stay and defend or leave early’ policy is very well-grounded in the available evidence. However, further research, outreach and community partnerships are needed to reinforce and clarify that leaving early or staying are not interchangeable options along a continuum which includes ‘waiting to see’ how the situation develops. In addition, clearly identifiable vulnerable groups need to be targeted with appropriate advice and, potentially, policy adaptations.

Introduction

Australian fire authorities believe that residents in bushfire-prone areas should be encouraged to decide, before the start of each fire season, whether they will prepare, stay and defend their property from bushfires or leave well before the fire arrives in their area. This advice is the basis of the ‘Prepare, stay and defend or leave early’ policy (referred to hereafter as ‘the policy’), which is set out in the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) *Position paper on bushfires and community safety* (2005) and endorsed by all Australian fire agencies.

The policy is underpinned by abundant evidence which shows that late evacuation is a dangerous response to bushfires that well-prepared houses can be successfully defended from bushfires and that they can provide safe refuge for people during the main passage of the fire front (Handmer & Tibbits 2005; Ch. 7 this volume). This evidence suggests that prepared but otherwise untrained people can protect their homes from bushfires by staying with and actively defending them. Since its inception, the policy has developed to become the centrepiece of community bushfire safety strategies in Australia (Gledhill 2003). Importantly, the Australian position is a significant move away from the evacuation doctrine that prevailed among emergency services in previous decades, towards greater community self-reliance.