

# Houses save people & People save houses: Wildfire community safety in Australia

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## Abstract

Australian fire agencies advise that people in the path of a bushfire (wildfire) should either prepare, stay and defend their properties, or leave the area well before the fire front arrives. The position is based largely on observations that evacuating at the last minute may be fatal, that houses provide relative safety from the smoke and heat of a wildfire, and that generally a key factor in house survival during a wildfire is the presence of people in the building. An important assumption is that houses catch fire from embers which can be put out by vigilant householders. In practice, full implementation of this approach is challenging for a range of reasons.

As part of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre's (CRC) research effort, our project is examining the evidence base for this approach and aims to suggest ways of improving implementation. We have found that the available published evidence, which goes back some 60 years, strongly supports the Australian position. The position is supported on the grounds of both improved safety and reduced property loss. The evidence also shows that the most dangerous option – and the cause of most fatalities - is last minute evacuation. Preliminary study of a data base of Australian bushfire related deaths is also supportive, and shows a rising trend of deaths in cars as people flee. Most of these victims are women and children suggesting a gender dimension. Case studies are underway in north-east Victoria, the Eyre Peninsular, Canberra, Sydney and Hobart. Complementary research has shown that most houses are lost through ember attack.

The presentation will explain the policy, set out the evidence for it, and discuss implementation issues and associated research.

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