

LEARNING LESSONS FROM RESEARCH INSIGHTS



AFAC RESEARCH UTILISATION CASE STUDY

Critical success factors:

- Leverage the AFAC collaboration process
- Build trusting relationships among key stakeholders
- Prioritise learning from lessons from research insights

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Cover image: courtesy of Tasmania Fire Service.

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Image courtesy of New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

Synopsis

Black Saturday 2009 made history as one of Australia's deadliest and costliest peace-time tragedies.

Catastrophic fires of "a scale and ferocity that tested human endurance"¹, claimed 173 lives, left 400 injured and resulted in millions in estimated damages and losses. Years on, the survivors and their communities continue with the emotional, social, financial, structural and physical recovery.

So what can be learned from Black Saturday that will help others in bushfire-prone communities prepare for the brutal reality of catastrophic fire?

In addition to implementing the wide ranging recommendations of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, Australia's fire and land management agencies have addressed these questions by drawing on lessons identified from research into the accounts of Black Saturday's survivors and the experiences of its deceased.

Leveraging AFAC's national collaboration process, they have captured their conclusions into an industry guideline (doctrine), *Community Safety Messaging for Catastrophic Bushfires: Lessons Learnt from Black Saturday Bushfires, Victoria 2009*, for use by community safety and engagement practitioners in AFAC member agencies.

A project team from AFAC's Community and Engagement Technical Group (CETG) developed the guideline through extensive rounds of review, consultation and drafting, negotiating consensus on factors such as its role, scope, content and format, explains AFAC's Director, Information and Community Safety, Amanda Leck.

"CETG members distilled conclusions from the research insights into major learnings to guide key messaging for communities in the lead up to, during and after catastrophic bushfire," she says.

The finished guideline was approved by the AFAC national council as doctrine for use by member agencies in late 2016. Today it is a pivotal document used by practitioners across all jurisdictions to guide development and implementation of bushfire education programs as well as in-house training.

This research utilisation case study describes how lessons based on research findings from a 126-page report were translated into a practical, 12-page guidance resource for community engagement practitioners nationally. It identifies the factors critical to the project's success, foremost of which was the collaboration through AFAC, a shared sense of commitment to learn from the research and trusting relationships built between the researchers, end users and relevant authorities to carefully use lessons identified from research on Black Saturday.

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¹Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission 2009.



Learning from research insights

Shortly after the Black Saturday bushfires, the Bushfire CRC with the approval of the State Coroner and the CFA, the then Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Office of the then Emergency Services Commissioner, formed a Research Response Task Force (Bushfire CRC-RTF). It was led by an international team of skilled researchers from Australia, NZ and the US, and supported by trained field staff from fire agencies across Australia. A variety of stakeholder organisations were represented, including Australian fire and emergency services and government organisations such as the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology.

Fire behavior, human behavior factors and the role and impact of building and land-use planning were put under the microscope in what was believed to be the first large-scale study of its type ever conducted in Australia and possibly in the world.

The human factors researchers focused on collecting data from the survivors of the deadly bushfires to help understand the key factors that contributed to loss of life and property and their prevention on that day of catastrophic bushfire.

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with more than 600 survivors from nine of the communities hit by the Black Saturday bushfires in a bid to understand their decisions and actions and their impact in the lead up to, during and immediately after the disaster.

“ There was a strong desire to contribute to learning, and to assist people who may need to deal with bushfire in future.”

At the same time, the Victoria Police Taskforce Phoenix began its detailed investigation into the deceased events for the Coroner, drawing insights from the last minutes of the victims, including how and where they died.

Subsequently, a Phoenix Taskforce officer, Sergeant Doug Hart, combined and analysed both data sets for a major overview report on lessons identified for the Coronial Brief.

In an unprecedented move, the then Coroner approved the controlled release of an edited version of the overview report for emergency services to use the lessons identified from the research insights in practice.

An edited version of the report, *Lessons Learned from the Black Saturday Bushfires Information for Fire Agency Managers of Community Safety*, was made available under controlled release conditions to agencies via AFAC, for translation into relevant polices and guidelines.

“There was a strong desire to contribute to learning, and to assist people who may need to deal with bushfire in future,” explains AFAC’s Research Utilisation Manager, Dr Noreen Krusel.

“As you can imagine there were a range of concerns among all parties about the release of the report due to its sensitivities and subsequent Coronial process. But these concerns were outweighed by the shared appreciation and recognition of the value of the learning it contained for immediate and future practice. The fire agencies directly involved were supportive and keen for all to learn from the experience.”



Image courtesy of Tasmania Fire Service.

Insights to action

The controlled release of the report included a briefing of senior community safety leaders from fire agencies. Sergeant Douglas Hart of Victoria Police subsequently presented the report to AFAC's Community Safety Group (CSG).

The CSG reviewed the lessons identified and referred it to the CETG for action, according to Amanda Leck.

At the time, the CETG members decided that the most valuable mechanism to support transfer of the research-based insights into practice was via a national guideline or industry doctrine. In this way, it would also be developed in the context of other policies and positions, she explained.

One of the first actions was to incorporate critical information in the messaging.

A Research Utilisation Project was established to support a CETG working group, which was led by Tasmania Fire Service's Manager of Community Development and Education, Sandra Barber.

There were various stages of consultation and writing as members worked through a structure and scope for the guideline that met their needs.

Fit for purpose

The finished guideline is a concise 12-page resource that breaks the key learning into three areas: planning for a bushfire, during a bushfire and immediately after a bushfire.

The guideline assumes a level of knowledge of bushfire science and safety and was designed to be interpreted in conjunction with AFAC's *Bushfires and Community Safety* position.

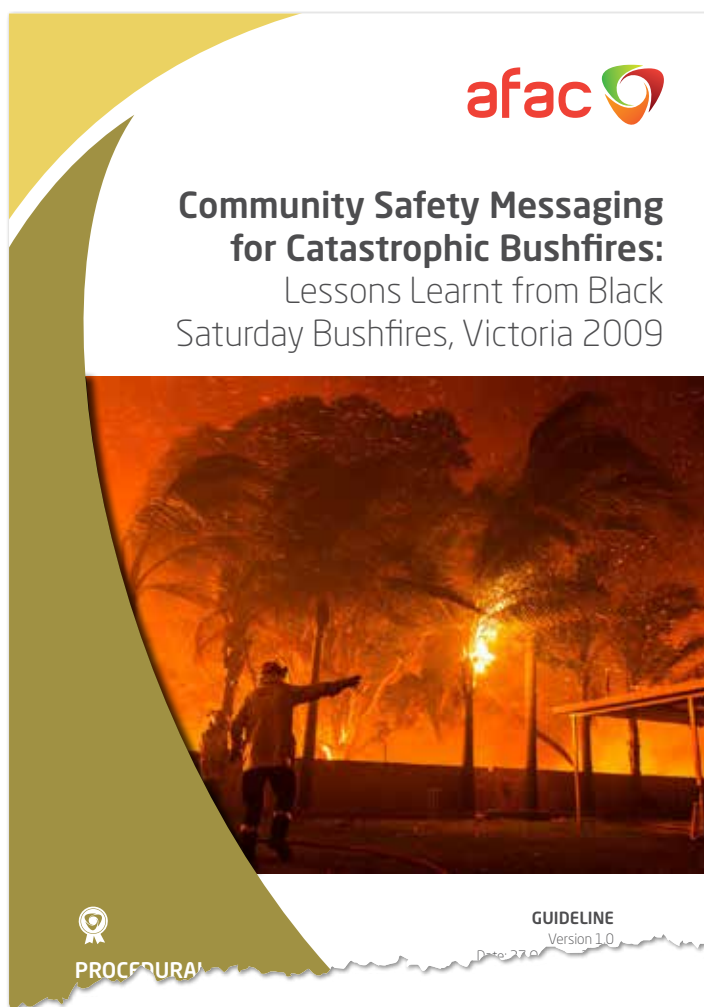
The guideline expands on the major learnings of the Victoria Police report, ***Lessons Learnt From The Black Saturday Bushfires: Information for Fire Agency Managers of Community Safety (Victoria Police, 2014)***.

The resource provides practical, consolidated and useful information to help local fire authorities communicate the report's findings to communities and improve fire safety.

Each set of key messages is accompanied by the related major learning from the research report along with more detailed information about the context of each issue,

including a real life example from the accounts and experiences of Black Saturday.

The core learnings cover the harsh reality of bushfire as recreated from the last minutes of the deceased and recalled by survivors. The physical and emotional aspects of confronting catastrophic bushfire are covered, including anticipating and being prepared for worst-case scenarios such as planning last resort exit routes and places of refuge.



Critical success factors

Trusting relationships

The research report contained sensitive information to both the families of the victims and the survivors of the event. Significantly, its contents were also still subject to the coronial process.

This potential barrier however was overcome by a shared sense of commitment to make careful use of the lessons drawn from the research insights, according to Noreen.

In its foreword, former Bushfire CRC CEO Gary Morgan and Tess Walsh of Victoria Police wrote that the report had much to offer fire and land- management agencies and the communities they served. "Its existence was only made possible, however "as a result of the efforts and professionalism of the fire agency personnel, police officers and bushfire researchers involved and, most particularly, by the survivors of the terrible events that occurred in Victoria in 2009".

"We owe it to the victims of the Black Saturday tragedy to make careful use of the lessons learned."

Strong and trusting relationships were built from the outset between the CRC researchers and the stakeholder organisations that supported their fieldwork. That trust was also extended to the families of the deceased and to the survivors who entrusted the researchers with their personal insights about the traumatic event.

A close working relationship was also forged with the Victoria Police Task Force representative Sergeant Doug Hart who was relocated within the Bushfire CRC to undertake the final overview analysis from CRC and Victoria Police research.

Collaborative development

The AFAC collaboration model supported and facilitated stakeholder input into the development of the national guideline.

CETG members undertook the evaluation and sense making of the research findings as end-user representatives on behalf of their peers. They negotiated the priorities and developed a guidance resource that transcends jurisdictional boundaries.

It's important that it's been jointly developed by those practising in the field, says Sandra Barber, the project leader, and Peter Middleton, one of her team members at TFS.

"Being based on research evidence, assessed by the CETG and having the backing of AFAC behind it, gives it strength, weight and relevance."

Anthony Clark, one of the project team members and Director, Corporate Communications at NSW RFS agrees. "It's been great that communications experts from across the industry have been involved in this important document, as it puts the focus on clear and concise information that will ultimately improve community safety."

Assessing implications for practice

CETG working group members, under the initial direction of the CSG, examined the implications of the research report and determined the best way forward.

Their brief was to ensure the lessons identified could be transferred to practice.



Image courtesy of Tasmania Fire Service.

“As an industry, we know that it’s important to learn from events like Black Saturday,” says Anthony. “But sometimes the amount of information and knowledge from these events can be quite overwhelming.”

“The aim of the guideline was to help consolidate the experience of Black Saturday, and distill the key information and messages that can be used by agencies in every day communications and engagement materials.”

Peter and Sandra agree: “the guideline provides focus and context for the learnings from Black Saturday for application in practice.

“It is useful because it breaks it down and summarises the key points for end users. It is critical to break things down into practical, actionable things that people can understand and use.”

The format of the guideline is now being used in development of other doctrine.

A commitment to learning

All contributors to the project believe its success hinged on a shared commitment to and appreciation of its value for learning and development.

“Within TFS, for example, it’s critically important to have an evidence base and action research underpinning our practice. The strong evidence base provides the strength and weight to this guideline,” says Peter.

“As end users, we’re making a point of ensuring these areas are covered across our messaging and engagement. It operates like a key checklist in reviewing our engagement materials or informing direct engagement activities with communities.

“It also reaffirms some of the work that we’ve been doing and provides a focus for some of the areas that we’ll be working on. For example, we will continue to go through it in our staff meetings across our department and will apply the findings and recommendations in our Bushfire-Ready Neighborhoods program.”

MAJOR LEARNING AREAS AT A GLANCE

The community safety guideline provides context and practitioner guidance for key messaging in 16 areas of learning that apply before, during and immediately after catastrophic bushfire. These learnings were distilled from research insights and are summarised below.

Planning for bushfire

Develop fire plans to help control fear and anxiety

Develop contingency plans

Plan for households with older people and the disabled

Plan for carers and caring agencies

During a bushfire

Don't rely on warnings

Know your exit routes

Be alert to fires near you despite the name of the fire

Wear fire-resistant clothes and shoes

Rely on your own water for firefighting and drinking/hydration

Understand and practise fire-safe landscaping and gardening

Understand the likelihood and effects of high winds

Plan to leave a burning house

Know when to leave a burning house

Avoid shelter in bathrooms

Seeking shelter alternative places of refuge as a last resort

Immediately after bushfire

Protect yourself from breathing in toxic chemicals

References and resources

Community Safety Messaging for Catastrophic Bushfires: Lessons Learnt from Black Saturday Bushfires, Victoria 2009

<http://www.afac.com.au/insight/doctrine/article/detail/community-safety-messaging-for-catastrophic-bushfires-lessons-learnt-from-black-saturday-bushfires-victoria-2009>

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