

Firey Women program

The South Australia Country Fire Service is building the skills women need to help keep themselves and their families safe in a bushfire.

The South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) *Firey Women* program was developed as a result of research into the 2005 Wangary fires on the Eyre Peninsula. The research indicated that women and children were over-represented in the fatalities, and that women were at higher risk during a bushfire. This was due to many household members with firefighting skills – generally men – being away from home on the day of the fires. Women found themselves at home caring for children, parents, animals and the property without the skills or knowledge to adequately protect themselves and those in their care (Goodman and Proudley, 2008).

The *Firey Women* program was developed and piloted in 2008 with funding from Emergency Management Australia (EMA). This process is detailed in De Laine, *et al's* (2008) conference paper, "Fiery women. Consulting, designing, delivering and evaluating pilot women's bushfire safety skills workshops".

The success of the program to date is indebted to this early work, and the commitment and efforts of the women of the Eyre Peninsula who have helped shape the content and delivery of the workshops that are run today.

The program

The content of the program is based on feedback provided by the Eyre Peninsula women. Participants indicated what skills they needed to help keep themselves and their families safe in a bushfire. The pilot program identified the range of skills that women needed which they were unlikely – or too embarrassed – to learn from their partners, such as map reading and how to use the fire pump. *Firey Women* workshops are structured to provide a safe and non-threatening environment where women can develop these skills without fear of impatience or criticism.

The pilot also highlighted the importance of being emotionally prepared to survive a bushfire. A significant proportion of the course is focused on emotional preparedness alongside the more tangible knowledge-based planning and physical preparations.



Image: Country Fire Service, South Australia.

Firey Women at the local workshop on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia.

The program design and materials were refined in 2010. It is these revised materials that the CFS Community Education Unit uses in the ongoing rollout of the program across South Australian rural communities.

The program is run as a course and, although the content is fairly strictly controlled, it is adapted to the local fire environment and run at a time and location most convenient to the women involved. Theoretically, it is run as either two full days or four three-hour blocks, and this may vary depending on the women's needs. Factors such as travel time, school hours and childcare are considered as part of the planning process.

The workshops provide women with bushfire safety skills, and include training units which are accredited under the *Public Safety Training Package*. This forms part of the standard requirements of CFS firefighters, and creates a pathway for some women to then undertake further training as female firefighting recruits or to progress into other roles within the CFS, such as within Community Education.

Firey Women covers bushfire behaviour, fire danger ratings and warnings. The program empowers women to make decisions for themselves and their families such as deciding when to 'leave early' or 'actively stay and defend' their homes. Women learn how to prepare a Bushfire Survival Plan, prepare themselves emotionally and physically, and develop the skills needed to prevent injury, to identify hazards around the home and operate pumps and firefighting equipment.

The experience is much more than a list of competencies. There is a lot of sharing involved – from sharing a meal, to sharing very personal fears and stories. The workshop can be an emotional rollercoaster for all involved, including the facilitators. Nevertheless, the Community Education Unit's ongoing evaluation of the program (unpublished) indicates that being involved in the program is a worthwhile experience – and a reality check – which leads to real behaviour change.

The outcomes

Pre and post workshop self-evaluations indicate an increased understanding of what it means to be prepared for bushfire. Data collected to 2011 (24 courses, 280 participants) indicates that before the workshop 57 per cent of participants thought they were 'well' or 'extremely well prepared for bushfire', but afterwards only 37 per cent recorded that perception. Importantly the data indicates a move towards better preparation and planning. For example 'having a practiced and written Bushfire Survival Plan' moved from 7 per cent to 69 per cent. Safer behaviour during fire danger weather 'leave early regardless of fire' moved from 7 per cent to 21 per cent and property preparation 'prepared a property protection plan with a calendar of actions' moved from 11 per cent to 66 per cent.

However, what the data does not measure is the potential for the *Firey Women* program to give women the confidence to be a decision-maker and action-taker in their own home and community. Participant

comments and anecdotal evidence suggest that women return to their home life with a greater sense of empowerment and determination to act safely and knowledgeably during the bushfire season. Sometimes connections made during the course continue independently. Some groups request return get-togethers and refreshers in subsequent years and some individuals instigate Community Fire Safe Groups in their areas. However, there is no long-term data collated to date to verify this.

For the CFS Community Education Officers, running a *Firey Women* program can be a very intense and satisfying experience. The program is run with at least two paid facilitators, of whom one must be a woman, with a minimum of 12 and maximum of 20 participants. From the facilitator's viewpoint, this is a rewarding experience and a great opportunity to connect closely with members of the community. From an organisational viewpoint, this can be an expensive program to run. There are some concerns that resourcing this program may compete with the Community Education Unit's core program, *Community Fire Safe*. In comparison to *Firey Women*, this program is well-supported by pre and post fire research as having measurable, positive impacts on personal and property survival during a bushfire (Goodman, *et al*, 2008).

There continues to be a fairly high demand for the *Firey Women* workshops and to date, there have been 39 workshops run with almost 500 women participating.

The up-coming challenge for the CFS Community Education Unit is how to continue supporting the delivery of the *Firey Women* program in South Australia, as part of the overall engagement strategy to facilitate a bushfire safer community.

Further information

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Web: www.cfs.sa.gov.au/site/prepare_act_survive_2012/community_programs/firey_women.jsp.

References

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Goodman, H., and Proudley, M., 2008. *The social contexts of responses to bushfire threat. A case study of the Wangary fire. In J. Handmer and K. Haynes (Eds.), Community Bushfire Safety. Collingwood, Vic: CSIRO Publishing, pp47-56. Weather the Storm – women prepare*