

Getting the message across in natural disasters

February 12 2014, by Niki Widdowson

Why do we see images of people being rescued from vehicles stuck in raging floodwaters despite repeated "If it's flooded, forget it" warnings from emergency services and media?

Why do some people stay and some people go when a bushfire is bearing down on their home?

A team of QUT researchers in the newly formed Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC is set to find out how people assess the risks of an unfolding natural disaster and use that to decide on their response to events like cyclones and bushfires.

Their aim is to fine tune the design of emergency warnings and updates to ensure people understand the instructions and act appropriately to minimise injury, loss of life and enhance the recovery phase of [natural disasters](#).

A second team, led by deputy director of QUT's Centre for Emergency and Disaster Management (CEDM) Dr Paul Barnes, will focus on the capabilities local, regional and state communities and agencies need to weather and bounce back from anticipated future natural disasters.

QUT School of Clinical Science's Professor Vivienne Tippet, who is leading the Communication and Warnings cluster in the CRC, said CEDM, a cross-disciplinary research group dedicated to reducing the effects of emergencies and disasters on health, community and

infrastructure, was well-placed to lead this project.

Professor Tippett will work with CEDM members Dr Amisha Mehta and Dr Dominique Greer from the QUT Business School and Professor Sharon Christensen, Professor Bill Duncan and Ms Amanda Stickley from the Faculty of Law to develop and examine how the law might influence risk communication and warnings.

"Our aim is to partner with government agencies to design effective communication that motivates people to act to protect their lives and others' during and immediately after a natural disaster," Professor Tippett said.

"Because people receive warnings from each other, news and social media and the [emergency services](#), there can be challenges about who to trust and how to behave as the natural disaster unfolds around them.

"We want to examine how people engage with emergency warnings and how psychology and the law can influence that process to guide the development of innovative digital and communication campaigns that ultimately protect lives."

QUT's Dr Paul Barnes is co-research leader of the CRC's Emergency Management Capability theme in which he is leading a project investigating the capabilities disaster response agencies need to invest in now in order to work better individually and together in the future.

"Multiple agencies must coordinate and work together to enhance response and to help people and communities recover quickly from the effects of natural disasters," Dr Barnes said.

"In Queensland in 2010/2011, for example, when 80 per cent of the state was disaster-declared after a series of floods and cyclones, bridges were

down, roads were impassable, food wasn't getting through, people couldn't get to work.

"We need to ensure the best and most efficient co-ordination possible for applying the resources and operations of agencies such as housing and families departments, members of the insurance industry, fire and emergency management and health at the local, regional and state-wide in real-time.

"My research will focus on how best we might integrate these agencies' response and recovery efforts so that communities can be back on their feet as soon as possible.

"And, because natural events are more severe and frequent than ever before, we may well have to do more with less and look at investment and planning for disaster scenarios we haven't faced yet by considering what conditions will be like in five and ten years to come and detail the coordinated capability needed to deal with them."

The new Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre draws together all of Australia's fire and [emergency](#) service authorities with the nation's leading experts across a range of scientific fields to explore the causes, consequences and mitigation of natural disasters.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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