

Communities must band together to protect against bushfires

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As Australia confronts devastating bushfire conditions, people across the nation are doing all they can to ensure the safety of their homes, property and loved ones.

But while many individuals are responding well to bushfire risks, a lack of preparation on the community level could be hampering their efforts, according to new research from the University of South Australia.

Conducted in partnership with the University of Adelaide and the University of Minnesota, researchers examined the perceptions of almost 1000 residents, landowners, and local fire and environmental authorities across high-risk fire regions of South Australia, finding a significant disconnect between the bushfire preparedness of individuals and that of the broader community.

Lead researcher Associate Professor Delene Weber says the lack of a cohesive community fire protection plan could place thousands of residents in danger over the fire season.

"Communities need to start thinking differently about preparing for bushfires, going beyond their individual fire protection plans, and looking to ways they can further support the community," Assoc Prof Weber says.

"When people think about protecting themselves from bushfires, they naturally focus on their immediate surrounds—their home, property and family—but bushfire safety is far more than the sum of individual efforts.

"Know your community's fire safety plans, make sure you check in on elderly or disabled neighbours who don't have capacity to get their property safe and talk with neighbours who are new to Australia and may not be fully aware of the potential of fire dangers.

"These things are imperative for people living in high-risk regional areas but are also important for those living in peri-urban landscapes such as the Eyre Peninsula and Adelaide Hills, both of which are increasingly at

risk."

With more than 1.85 million Australians living in peri-urban regions, there's a growing need for greater bushfire awareness in metropolitan fringe areas.

"Residents and authorities have told us—and previous bushfires have shown us — that inadequate communication between developers, emergency services and planning authorities in metropolitan fringe areas means these areas are not as fire safe as they could be," Assoc Prof Weber says.

"Conscientious planning is vital for protecting all communities—established and new. But for new communities we have opportunities to construct homes specifically for bushfire conditions, to plant streets with appropriate vegetation that can help protect our homes from ember attacks, and to plan roads with better access.

"Well-planned transport systems are vital, and they need to be managed appropriately. Authorities must also ensure that scheduled road maintenance or closures are done outside of peak fire periods, and endeavour to manage road incidents smoothly and efficiently. Small oversights in either of these spaces can have very high consequences."

An ongoing challenge for peri-urban communities is the fact that many residents do not realise they may be at risk of bushfires, or grass fires, which move more quickly.

"People move to areas outside the city for many reasons—for the greenery, to escape the hustle and bustle, or because of costs. But because they're still in built-up, residential areas, they don't perceive themselves to be at-risk of fires.

"As a result, some residents in peri-urban developments are not as informed as they should be about bushfires, and they don't tend to be as prepared.

"It is not good enough to have a [bushfire](#) survival plan in your head—people need to take the time to prepare a written plan and think about the likely scenarios, such as no power, not knowing where everyone in your household is, and not being about to use your phone.

"Bushfire safety is everyone's responsibility. We all have to pitch in, and we all have to look out for one another. One weak link and the results could be devastating."

More information: D. Weber et al, Are we ready for bushfire? Perceptions of residents, landowners and fire authorities on Lower Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, *Geoforum* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.10.006](#)

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