



Tuross Head Rural Fire Brigade

Some of you may recall the prophetic words of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, quoted in our newsletter last November. He emphatically stated that “there will be fires this fire season”, however the intensity and duration of those will depend largely on local conditions at the time.

We have all been shocked over the tragic loss of life in the Victorian fires and are grateful that NSW has not been struck by a similar catastrophe. Some of you may wonder why Victoria and not us! Are we better prepared and better trained or are we just lucky! Fate has granted us an exemption from catastrophe this time ... maybe it's our turn next time. And be warned that there will be a next time, in fact there will be many next times as global warming brings about similar circumstances again and again.

So what can we do to maximise our chances of survival next time? What measures can we, in Tuross Head, take to reduce the risk of losing our property or even our lives or those of our loved ones, to FIRE. Questions that have recently been asked in our community include:

1. Is Tuross Head safe from bush fires of the kind recently experienced in Victoria
2. What should we do if a fire should suddenly descend on us?
3. Does our community have an evacuation plan?
4. Is it safer to stay with our house or leave the area early?
5. Is it safer in a car or on foot?
6. Is our local Bush Fire Brigade adequately resourced and if not, what does it need?



To more fully explore these issues I quote from a recent article written by Julie Cart, in the Irish Times under the heading: “convoy of vehicles fled from one fire into another”. The article goes on to say that “as Australia comes to grips with the deaths of at least 200 people in the deadliest bushfires in its history, officials here say they will take a hard look at the much vaunted “leave early or stay and defend” policy, which trains homeowners to defend their homes and is being considered for adoption in Europe and some parts of the US. In addition, authorities expect that a large number of fatalities will have occurred in motorway crashes during panicked evacuations, the very scenario the Australian policy seeks to avoid.

Australia adopted the “stay or go” approach about a decade ago following what was then the nation’s worst natural disaster – the “Ash Wednesday” fires in 1983 that killed 83 people and injured 2,600. Researchers found after those blazes that the most frequent cause of death in wildfires was people being trapped in their cars trying to flee. They determined that properly trained homeowners would be at less risk if they stayed off the roads and took shelter. The policy includes extensive training that emphasises homeowner preparation that calls for measures such as clearing a

defensible space, storing water, prestaging fire equipment and establishing a fire plan. Research further demonstrated that during wildfires homes burn, not in a wall of flames, but instead succumb to small spot fires sparked by windborne embers, often carried miles ahead of the fire front. Homeowners are instructed to stamp out small fires – often with mops – and take shelter in their homes as the fire moves past.

Officials say the “stay or go” policy has been demonstrably successful in saving lives and property in Australia, and is now the most talked-about strategy in the firefighting world. Australian fire officials travel the globe explaining their ideas to officials looking for ways to better deploy fire crews. A decade of concerted public safety announcements and community-based education was thought to have nearly blanketed the populace with the details of the programme. However, the proven policy can break down in the face of raw panic. “Even if you have been to the lectures and have had somebody of experience tell you what happens, and you rehearse what you are going to do . . . you still don’t completely understand the ferocity of that fire when it comes,” says Daryl Wells, captain of the fire brigade in Werribee, a western suburb of Melbourne. “All the information that we provide for the people – part of the psyche is they think they know better, they think they can do it. But when they feel the heat, and then noise, as the fire starts to come over the hill, that causes panic. They say, ‘Let’s get in the car.’ When you get up in the morning and conditions are like that, that’s when you decide if you stay or go. By the time the smoke is coming up the hill behind your house, it’s too late.”

According to researchers, the vast majority of deaths occur when panicked residents race on to smoke-obscured roads, often littered with downed trees, charred wildlife or emergency vehicles. Reports from last weekend, where hundreds of individual fires raced across southeastern Australia fanned by high winds, suggest that in some hard-hit communities residents organised convoys of vehicles that fled one fire only to be consumed by another of which they were unaware. “What seems to have happened in some cases was people had a perception that a wave of fire was coming over the hill at them, and they ran from that,” says Kevin Tolhurst, a fire researcher at the University of Melbourne. “But in fact they may have been surrounded by fires in many directions and taken by surprise. That complexity is lost to some.”



So in the light of what appears to be a growing lack of confidence in the “stay or go” policy, is this strategy still valid ... and what plans should we be making in Tuross Head? Before Chatham Park ends up looking like the picture on the left we must act. At our last monthly meeting (10th February) your Brigade resolved to facilitate community discussion and information sessions aimed at directly responding to any questions related to your safety in the event of a repeat of the recent fire events.

Tuross Head Brigade will soon be in a position to provide more information on the upcoming sessions and you'll read about them in the Tuross Head Weekly Times on www.turosshead.org.

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