

## Your physical and emotional preparation



Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Dr Jim McLennan, LaTrobe University

Dr Danielle Clode, Flinders University

Dr Rob Gordon OAM, Clinical Psychologist

### The Q&A process

Members of the audience submit questions during the Q&A sessions. The Moderator passes a selected question to the Chair who asks for a response from the presenter.

### Transcript of Q&A sessions

#### 1. Leaving early

**There was one I wanted to ask that came out of the poll results, and that's 25% of people believe they won't be staying if a fire comes. However, the research tells us that often people stay longer than they meant to, or the leaving can be dangerous. It would seem that you probably even have to practise your emotional response even if you have that view that you're not going to be around. Danielle?**

#### Danielle Clode

I would definitely say you have to be emotionally and psychologically prepared to leave too. You know, to successfully leave is not as easy as people think. To make sure you've got what you need to go, that you're ready early enough, that you're actually making that decision safely. It can be impacted by any number of things: family functions that you might have on that day, medical appointments, you know, pets, all sorts of things can interfere and change your plans. Somebody coming to visit, these sorts of things. So, staying is not an easy decision either. In an actual fact, it's a really hard decision to leave and to leave early enough.

I think that you really need to think through how prepared you are to do that and to practice that as well.

#### Jim McLennan

The most recent post-bushfire interview studies that I did was in 2014. The Parkerville fire in the Perth Hills. And one of the things that struck me was a number of people who intended to leave, that was their plan, they thought they were prepared both mentally and physically. But it took them forever to actually get to the stage of shutting the car door and turning the ignition key. Many of them found subsequently that the route they were going to take had been blocked by the advance of the fire. A lot of them had to actually abandon the vehicle and walk to safety, you know, a pretty considerable risk. So, what I got from that was particularly if there are young children in the family, it takes a hell of a long time, unless you're really on top of it, to actually leave.

## **Rob Gordon**

I think this why that leaving strategy really requires you to leave before the fire starts, or when you get the first indication, before you're under threat. Because we know that perhaps the most dangerous place to be when the fire is going through is on the road. For all those reasons that you described Jim. And therefore, I think that the whole idea of having precept triggers that have been sought out calmly and carefully with all the information as to when you will take certain actions, not relying on how you interpret it on the day.

### **2. Different levels of emotional preparation with the family**

**This next question follows up really well I think Rob, and it's regarding the poll. Perhaps an additional limiting factor is uneven interest in the work of becoming emotionally prepared across the participants in a household. Can the panel comment on that?**

## **Rob Gordon**

I can just say I just talked to so many people where one member of the couple saw the risk completely differently. And all I'd say in that case is, actually, what usually happened was they dithered and argued until the fire was on them, and then they had a very severe life-threatening experience and lost their house. And that's the trauma, it's the sense of threat. And, I think yeah, that's the point I'd make about that sense of threat that has to be protected from.

## **Jim McLennan**

There is this sort of unarguable principle, but when there's a bushfire, the safest place to be is somewhere else.

### **3. Preparing teenagers**

**Do you have a view on how you could ensure that teenagers are prepared without becoming too fearful?**

## **Danielle Clode**

I'm happy to talk about my experience with teenagers. And I think that one technique is to use their skills. So, one of the first things I set my daughters on when we were threatened by fires was putting one on the internet to keep track of all the information that was coming in. So, that was part of her job, was to keep track of the information coming over. The internet over the scanners, whatever information she could access to find out what was happening with the weather and keep track of that for me. Which was a very natural thing for her to do and something I'd probably have failed at if I tried to do as well as all the physical stuff.

Another thing was using, you know, perhaps with younger children, giving them this is in terms of staying and defending, I use that example not because I think it's the best strategy but just because that's what I happened to do was to give them a task like having those super drencher water pistols, the great big ones that pump out a huge amount of water, that's always guaranteed to get most teenagers and kids engaged in their activities and searching for ember attack and those sorts of things.

I think the same thing applies with giving them a sense of responsibility for their own possessions when you're getting prepared to leave. Making sure that they're in charge of those things, to having them ready to leave. Other than that, you know, when I did leave when my children were younger, it was about making sure you're going to go and do something that they want to do. So, you go paintballing, go to the movies, go to the skate park, go somewhere that they want to go and suddenly leaving will become a lot easier. You do have to work with the things that they're motivated by.

## Chair

What about preparing teenagers before there's the threat of a fire, but you want to talk about what that threat might be without embedding, you know, deep fears into them.

## Rob Gordon

I've got a few thoughts there, Malcolm. I think that we actually teach kids about a lot of things that they should be frightened of, like traffic and snakes and sharks and strangers and so on. But we do it in such a way as to pair it with behaviours that will protect them, so they know what to do to avoid snakes and sharks. And I think it's the same with fire. We don't want to say that it's not dangerous, or even potentially lethal, but we want to say we're going to tell you what to do to keep yourself safe. And I think that would include good protective clothing, you know. Face masks and goggles and things so they're protected from smoke and so on, so that they can function. And if we can't do that, then we probably should have gone yesterday. And maybe that has to be factored into the plan.

## Jim McLennan

A family that I know had an interesting approach. What they used to do every now and then was play what they called the pre-mortem game. Now, you know about post-mortems, after somebody died then coroner finds out sort of about what went wrong. Well, the pre-mortem is to try and think of all things that could possibly go wrong, and how we might prevent it and what you might do. And they introduced an element of fun in that people, members of the family, could propose the most outrageous kinds of unimaginable things. And they said that seemed to be a way of raising issues without them necessarily being so fearful to where people want to avoid them. Now, that's not been evaluated, it's a case study of one. I offer it for what it's worth.

## 4. Strengthen emotional response

**Is there a practical set of steps that we can practice to particularly strengthen our emotional preparedness for a fire? Now, this person is remembering the shock and disbelief of the faces of those in Mallacoota when they realized the only way to save themselves was to go to the beach and then onto the water in boats and finally be rescued by the Navy. And the question is how on earth do you prepare for something like that? Is there a set of practical steps that you can practice to strengthen your emotional preparedness?**

## Jim McLennan

I make a preliminary comment, I'm sure that both Danielle and Rob will be much better at answering that question than I. But the reality is, during summer in Victoria there are bushfires. Now, there's almost no place in the state that the bushfire couldn't possibly arise. So, particularly if you're going on a vacation or something like that, just factor in the fact that there might be a bushfire. And it's not very likely, but if it happens it's going to be bloody serious. So, talk about it. What will we do if you're in the caravan, but, what will we do, if a bushfire is threatening? It's the old notion of forewarned is forearmed.

## Rob Gordon

I think that's a very good example, Malcolm. Because the Premier and the Emergency Service Commissioner and various other people said, several days before, get out of Gippsland. If you don't live there, get out. It's going to be the worst day ever. And it exactly was. But, you know, I've worked with a number of people who were holiday makers, you know. One person who's been holidaying in Mallacoota for 30 years. There's never been a fire in the summer when he's been there, and he couldn't make it real. He'd never thought about it. He'd never considered. So, he was one of those people that felt very traumatized. Now, I think exactly what Jim says, we've just got to

embed fire in our consciousness, like presumably most people have embedded snakes. They don't go running around in long grass with bare feet in the middle of summer. So, in the same way, I think they should be thinking about and listening and hearing what the Premier is saying, taking it seriously.

## **Chair**

Recognizing that there could be a fire is one way of preparing yourself. What other sorts of things Danielle, do you think?

## **Danielle Clode**

I think that the scenarios are really important. And it's a little bit what Jim was saying about the pre-mortem game. It's the what-ifs. So, it's simply asking yourself, "What if there is a fire? What are we going to do?" Just having that capacity to ask the question, "What's going to happen if this is the situation?" This is the problem if you don't recognize the risk. You really need to recognize the risk. And it's very hard to get people to accept there is a risk in the first place that's the problem. Once you accept that risk, you can do the planning because you think about it and you think about, "What am I going to do in this situation?" I'm not sure what the answer is to getting people to recognise the risk though.

## **5. Reading up beforehand**

**Does the panel have any recommended reading for physical and/or emotional preparation? Is there anything people can search out?**

## **Rob Gordon**

I reckon to read first person accounts, as Jim was saying. There's nothing like that to give you the sense. And most of those will talk about the fussing, you know. I call it dithering. The inability to make good, clear decisions and getting caught up on details. All the things that Jim mentioned. They're so many examples. And I'm sure they're available on the internet.

## **Malcolm Hackett**

There are certainly a mess of them after Black Saturday, and they make for compelling reading, and I'm sure they'll be easy to get hold of.

## **Jim McLennan**

When I first had to become involved in bushfire safety research, I found a reading book by Paul Collins *Burn. The epic story of bushfire in Australia*. That was enormously informative. Basically, a historical account of the major bushfires across the continent up until Black Saturday. Now, that might help somewhat, with the point Danielle has made about just getting a better understanding of how fires occur, what it's like, the devastating consequences. It's factual. It's not of itself to do with being psychologically prepared. But I come back to this basic point of to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

## 6. Checklists

**How important are checklists in keeping one on message? And, I suppose, it's sort of a related question. What of the physical guidelines or capabilities recommended for people to be able to defend their home, is there information around on that?**

**Danielle Clode**

I'm hoping that Rob will say checklists are a good idea because that's what I'm planning on doing next.

**Rob Gordon**

I think anything that frames your understanding and your actions, you know. It's being able to act that gives you power, and all of that energy is then converted into purposeful action, and I think checklists counteract the dithering. You know, the competing options of which one should I do. If you've sorted out logically, you can say I've got to do this, and now this, now this. Or, if you're going to evacuate, you go through a procedure. That's what aircraft pilots do, don't they? They have checklists and checklists. They know that they depend on them.

**Danielle Clode**

I actually do have laminated checklists for things that I get confused about. Like starting the generator and starting the pump. We have a laminated checklist that's attached to the pump. So, it's right there next to you, because I always forget.

**Rob Gordon**

I live in a bushfire area and my work is sitting on my bum listening to people in a comfortable chair. And so, to suddenly rip out that sort of lifestyle, and run around on a 40-degree day makes you probably faint. So, I'm certain when summer comes, I'll make a policy to actually be out and about in those hot days with the sort of gear on that I would need to wear. And curiously, I actually feel protected from the heat with heavy clothes, once you kick off your thongs and put your boots on. And so, actually, the whole business of kitting up and being out and about in those days is not a powerful, overwhelming experience, but I think you need to make sure that your body's up to it, that your blood circulation is good enough and, you know, you can deal with that, otherwise you shouldn't be there. Because we know people die of heart attacks, don't we?

## 7. Guidelines for physical and emotional preparation

**Do you know whether there are any, you know, guidelines about physical capability and emotional capability for people to defend their homes?**

**Rob Gordon**

I don't know if there are specific guidance, but I'd certainly say that if people are aware that they are prone to anxiety or panic disorder or things of that sort, and they can't trust themselves, then they should say that, "I should evacuate on high risk days." But the other thing that's been observed is that, in the old days when we used to have psychiatric hospitals, there are anecdotes of fires or floods descending on these places and everyone just seems to snap out of their illness, run around and help each other in a very calm manner, until they get back to safety and then they actually become unwell again. It's as though this reptile brain suddenly kicks in and sidelines all the other stuff. So, I think people can expect that if they're not overwhelmed by fear, they can hold to actions that'll be very protective.

## **8. Dealing with dominant partners**

**There is a good question here that I think would apply to lots of people. My partner and I have an equal relationship and have agreed to check in with each other depending on the circumstances as to how we are both feeling about leaving early or staying to defend. However, I am concerned that I have seen very dominant people, usually the male partner, insist that all the family members will stay and I suspect this can lead to heightened stress for some during the bushfire season, knowing that they will be expected to stay even though they don't want to. Have you got any suggestions?**

**Rob Gordon**

Well, I think that's going to put enormous stress on a relationship. And I know of one relationship where that sort of situation happened. They ended up evacuating and nearly dying and she divorced him afterwards, because she just never felt safe again. So, I think people need to realize that what happens in those very dangerous circumstances will be an absolute game-changer for their relationship. And maybe that needs to be affected. I would suggest a lot of discussion, fuelled by very realistic scenarios of what's happening.

**Danielle Clode**

I think that is a really common scenario. It certainly does happen a lot with the gender division in people's expectations and perceptions of risk. And I think it's probably worth talking about that issue of whether you think you're protecting property, or whether you're protecting life. I think that in a lot of circumstances, if you can make the case that it's a risk to life sometimes, that person who thinks they need to stay and defend they're thinking about defending property, but they need to recognize that they have to defend their families' lives, and that is likely to sway them a little bit more in the other direction.

**Rob Gordon**

There's a gender bias here too. Men don't like to be pushed around by nature, whereas women are much more cautious. And so, you know, the woman is going to be biased in favour of danger and the man's going to be biased in favour of minimising it. So, between them, hopefully, they can reach a compromise if they talk enough beforehand. I like your idea about the pre-mortem Jim.

**Jim McLennan**

I was just going to comment that it's certainly the case that whole families have perished because of just the issue you're describing. It is a serious issue, and I guess if, typically, it's the woman in the relationship who wants to leave, the person may simply be faced with a very difficult choice, particularly if there are children involved. And it's a matter of what's more important, life or obedience.

## 9. Dealing with the stress of multiple warnings

**This next question starts with a statement. During the recent East Gippsland fires, at 3 pm I got an emergency warning on the phone too late to evacuate. At 3:10, I got an emergency warning that I could evacuate. 3:15, a fire truck with sirens blaring came up to drive to find out if I was staying. How does one manage the multiple stresses of all these warnings? Should one turn off the emergency app in a crisis, as it's not helpful? In fact, the fire-front came through at 10 pm that night.**

### Danielle Clode

I do wonder in this scenario about the issue of waiting to hear what someone else tells you to do, you know? Looking for external source of advice on what you should do. And I think people are far too dependent on that. Those warnings are information, they shouldn't be telling you what to do. They're just giving you information on risk. And you need to make the decision of what to do. And if you're making that decision, then all of that extra information is merely material for you to utilize and process, not material you think you have to act on immediately.

### Rob Gordon

There was so much anger in East Gippsland at the inaccuracy, and the same in Black Saturday, the inaccuracy of warnings. And, of course, we can encourage the authorities to do better, but I think it's very important that we don't assume that we've got a perfectly efficient warning system. Because the circumstances in such huge fires I think completely overwhelm people or become quite unpredictable, particularly when these firestorms create their own weather patterns. Why should they be predictable, or why should the authorities have enough sensors or observers to actually know? I think it's really important we don't make an assumption that because there's a warning app, that it's actually accurate. It's, as you say, I think it's a good way to put it Danielle, it's just information.

## 10. Decision points

**Would it be possible to hear some more about recognition of decision points having been reached and acting on them, such as when to seek shelter or when to leave well before?**

### Rob Gordon

I've certainly got some thoughts about that. think it comes back to the point I made about having decision points. And so, you know I just can remember the fear that I felt on those days before Black Saturday, when we had I think three days in a row that were well over 40, and no wind at all. And then I thought to myself, if there were any fire now, it would be dangerous. But if there was wind it would be catastrophic. And then, of course, two or three days later we had Black Saturday. So, I think you could have predicted that. I think if you're not prepared to fight a fire then you don't want to be at home on that day and leave in the morning when it's still cool.

And I think the other thing to do is to really think carefully about where is the fire likely to come from? What are the roads? What's the evacuation points? And this would be part of sort of filling out the checklists. Things like which direction is the wind going from? If we were to get caught how would we get out? And so on. I think that would help people to make decisions, and you have to know that if the wind's coming this way, if the fire gets to this point, and it should be a long way away, then our evacuation route is going to be in danger so we need to leave a bit well before that, and so on. It gets complicated, but I think it's the only way to feel prepared.

### Jim McLennan

I think this clearly leads into the point made earlier by Danielle. There's a need for an active mindset. It's important to assess your risk, decide what's safe for you and your family in your circumstances, and then make a plan. What's the worst situation? It is to be passive and expect

that someone will take care of you, someone will be looking after you and telling you what to do. It's just not like that. It would be pleasant if it was, but when there's a severe fire of the Black Saturday/Black Summer kind, to a large extent you're on your own. And the best way to manage that is to have thought it through and made appropriate decisions based on the best information you're able to get.

## **11. Real life accounts**

### **Chair**

I've got two books for people if they want to find some real-life accounts. One of them, which I've read, that is gripping, and which Nick and Grace have told us about is *Kinglake-350*, by Adrian Hyland. And the other is a series of accounts from the St. Andrews/Strathewen/Arthurs Creek area written by Jim Usher called *Footsteps in The Ash*. And both of those will give people a sense of what it's like.

## **12 Thanks to panel**

### **Chair**

Could I thank you all very much for providing us with your experience and reflections and your knowledge of the area. The presentation was wonderful, Danielle. And the discussion has been terrific.