



## Getting Ready for a an EI Nino Summer

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Panel members: Parvathi Subramiam  
Craig Lapsley  
Danielle Clode

### Malcolm

There's two questions that are pretty similar. I have kids that at a preschool and a school, what are the best ways to engage with them before the start of the fire season without scaring them but encouraging them to understand how they can participate in doing a fire plan?

### Craig

I think it's the walk in a nice way around the property, the neighbourhood or the street without scaring them. "So what do you reckon about this?" Involve them in some way or have them as part of the journey instead of just being "Here's the plan." Now that's easy for me to say, but that involvement is important.

Children at school. It's important they understand there is the importance of the plan at school. There's an importance of the plan at 3:20 in the afternoon of what we're going to do and those discussions and I'm sure everyone does it in a school safety sense.

If you're late to pick someone up at school, what's the plan? On every day, let alone a fire day. Those things are important. So to me it's actually let them walk with you. Maybe you've got to be careful, everyone knows the boundaries of scaring and engagement. But to have them as part of the journey I think is really important and give them something to do as part of that journey. "Yeah, we're going to move the woodpile from the back from where it's been stored all winter to somewhere away from the back door. Let's do it." So involve them and tell them why we're doing it. Because it could burn or it could do this. So involvement with the kids I think is absolutely fundamental.

### Danielle

I have two children and I have lived in bushfire zones with them from infancy right through to where they're now young adults and they have always been involved in our bushfire plans and indeed they've been involved in defending our house during bushfires. I guess for me one of the key things is to give them a task that's suitable for their age and appropriate for the event. When they were really little we always left early, but when they were a bit older, we stayed and defended, and they always had a task. The younger one would be looking after the pets and the animals. That was their responsibility.

And we had water pistols are a great one. They're responsible for squirting out little spot fires or whatever. So there's lots of things like that that you can give them to do that's suitable for their age. I guess one of the things I have noticed though with friends of mine who have had children go through fires where they have been perhaps given tasks or perhaps just left to keep themselves

safe is that the kids are then worried about what their parents are doing. So you need to explain to the kids what the parents are doing, that the parents are safe and behaving safely, that they're not putting themselves at risk. Because often children can be very afraid of what's happening. They're more worried about their parents and they are necessarily about themselves.

Sometimes there are things we don't plan for or we don't anticipate kids being worried about and we have to be ready for those with schools it's really important to clearly communicate with the schools what your plan is and how their plan interacts with your plan. Because we've had lots of occasions in the past where schools have decided they have a different plan. Particularly if your kids are at schools that aren't in a bushfire area. They may not have as well-developed bushfire plans as you do or a school that's in a bushfire zone. So talking to the school and making sure the school has a clear idea of what your expectations are in a fire and what they plan to do if children can't get home or have to be kept behind. So ensure there's no confusion. There's nothing more stressful and damaging in a fire than not knowing where your children are. And that will precipitate quite dangerous behaviours often, so we really need to be clear about those things as well.

### **Malcolm**

Parvathi, how important is it to know the school's policy or the preschool's policy on closures on certain days and different fire ratings and so on?

### **Parvathi**

I think that helps you with your decision making. It's important to know what the school's policies are. It's also important to know what your workplace policy is and what the policy of the nursing home that an elderly family member might be in as well. I think it's really important to be across what is in place. And as Danielle said everyone being aware of each other's plans and how they work together or how they may clash. And if they clash that's something that we need to talk about and we need to address.

I guess the hesitancy or the anxiety around having the conversation because of fear of scaring the person that you're having a conversation with doesn't only go for children. That's the case for lots of people and it can be the reason why we avoid having these conversations. But it's actually a lot more scary to not know what's going to happen when these emergencies happen. The reason we ask it is that these emergencies are scary. It's a lot more settling when we can actually address them. It would be really scary if this happened and we didn't know what we're going to do. If you can spin it and reframe that part of the reason that we're having these conversations is to make it less scary, especially for children.

Knowing exactly what's going to happen to the best of your ability of course but can be really reassuring. And as Danielle said they can then take on some responsibility where it is appropriate and you can also lean on some of the resources. There's quite a lot following fires and following COVID that have been developed specifically to get children involved in this process. I would definitely encourage you to have a look out for those. I think through COVID we've all had that lived experience where we have different memories and different things that we have and different concerns, so it can be helpful to unpack some of those things too.

One of the facilitators we had worked through the P-CEP course. The activity where you have to talk about the capability wheel, and he chose to talk about it with his partner. Just two adults having the conversation and their very young child who was three I believe overheard them having the conversation and they wanted to join in. That wasn't even planned around having the child

involved but it got them thinking about what would I do? Would I go to preschool? Will I get to see my friends? What would we do about this that and the other?

I think where possible you can involve children and it's very empowering to be on the front foot with these conversations as well. So don't be too shy to start them because we're worried about getting people scared. That's why we start P-CEP with the everyday. We're talking about things that are already happening and what would happen to the everyday if something else was thrown into the mix as well.

### **Malcolm**

How many councils or agencies actually have a directory of people requiring help during different types of emergencies? Or is that just a nice thing to have?

### **Parvathi**

I would probably challenge that and say that that's not a very nice thing to have at all. Because it completely takes away the capability that people do have to prepare. If you're on a list somewhere it doesn't acknowledge there are things you may be able to do for yourself. And it doesn't guarantee that there is a plan for you. You might be on a list. There are things you can do for yourself, and then there's planned reliance on others. And it doesn't mean you have to do everything by yourself. That's not what I'm saying at all. But you have to have a plan for the things that you can't do for yourself and that involves everybody coming together to create that plan.

There's legislation that also requires aged care providers and NDIS providers to have these plans as well. So where you are concerned around people who may be more vulnerable or may not participate in the P-CEP conversation in the way that I've described there are avenues to get that person prepared and that is more around leveraging that support network around that person. To answer that question I'm not sure how many people or how many councils have a register of sorts like that. But we've seen time and time again that these registers aren't useful because what you need for community resiliency is for everyone to take the responsibility, for how they're going to prepare and respond for that emergency.

### **Malcolm**

We have a baby and a toddler. What special measures should I plan and prepare for them to enable us to leave early?

### **Danielle**

When my children were infants I had a policy of leaving every total fire ban day no matter what. I just made it a policy that that's what we would do. I changed my childcare arrangements or I went into town or I would often just go to the movies or go to a shopping centre. Just plan to spend the day out where I could. Or go and visit a friend in the city. It did take a lot of effort. I have to say that amongst all my colleagues and all my peers who also had small children at the time I think I was the only one who did that. Even though that's what we suggest people do. The fire authorities would suggest in those cases you would leave every total fire ban day.

It's a hard thing to do but I actually found it was possible. Obviously, it differs for different situations, but I actually found it became quite a challenge just to find new activities or new places to go or new people to see. Meant I got to see people that I wouldn't see normally. I think trying to build it into your everyday life and make it a part of a routine rather than it being something scary

and negative. Turn it into something that's a positive and make it part of something that you do that is a pleasure to do rather than it being a chore.

### **Malcolm**

This will be for you Parvathi. A member of our household has a disability. What are the ways to support them so they can feel more confident during the fire season?

### **Parvathi**

I'd love for you to give it a go having a P-CEP conversation with this member of your family. You're speaking specifically about fires. I think one of the nicest ways to personalize this is actually connecting with your local brigade where possible. We have wonderful community engagement teams as part of our emergency services who do a lot of things to help the public know what their role is, often meeting a person that is in this role to talk about this. Seeing a fire truck seeing the tools they use can really help to spark the interest as well as get that process started.

I think connecting in with your local emergency services is always a nice way to start talking about that risk and ease into some of those conversations as well. And yes, I would encourage that P-CEP conversation. There are a lot of ways to do it where it's not just talking as well, you can make it quite fun. You can turn that capability wheel into a bunch of games, I won't give you any suggestions because I don't know the person you're going to have this conversation with. But I would trust the relationship you have with them and what you know they respond well to and the way they learn best as well so you set yourself up for success with those conversations too. And you can take the course too if you'd like to get some more ideas.

### **Malcolm**

Craig, I reckon this one's for you, you'd know the state pretty well. For our Christmas holidays we're going to North Victoria with a couple of stopovers then coming back through Gippsland. What should we know about the fire risks and how can we be prepared?

### **Craig**

That's a good question. Again the time period and the weather scenarios is obviously the key bit. But also where you're going and if you're staying in a caravan park versus an AirBNB facility versus a hotel motel arrangement. So your accommodation will have plans and if they don't necessarily have a plan, it's time you think about that. My take on the season it'll be very much a grassland season. That is there'll be prolific growth in the grasslands. Understand the speed of fire and where the warnings and the geographical placement of wherever you are. Whether it's Northeast Victoria or you're travelling into New South Wales or South Australia or wherever you are in Australia. That mobility issue is about situational awareness and what plans others have that you need to participate in.

### **Danielle**

Can I add to that? When I'm travelling through fire prone areas in that time of year especially areas I don't know I always have a woollen blanket in the car and I always have a good supply of water. So as an extra protection as a last resort if you get caught out it's a good idea to have some extra form of protection in the car as well.

## **Malcolm**

One of the questions actually asked about what to carry in a car and they referred to airways' protection. What is good protection for airways?

## **Danielle**

I don't know if Craig's got more recent information on this. The issue of cars has always been a little bit of a concern. Obviously, you don't want to be caught in your car in a fire. But the general rule is to make sure that you're parked in a cleared area with as little flammable material around as possible, keep the car closed, close the air vents so that you're not sucking the outside air into the car and provide as much of a barrier which is where an extra blanket can sometimes help to protect from the heat. A lot of car deaths are actually caused from people fleeing the car, so any protection from the radiant heat is always better than none.

It's always a very difficult decision and you have to judge the circumstances you find yourself in and try and make the safest possible decision you can, but the most protection you can offer from radiant heat the better. And obviously if you've got a woollen blanket that's going to protect your airways better or being inside the car.

## **Craig**

What Danielle says is spot on. If you are caught there know how to protect yourself in a vehicle. Airway protection - we're now used to masks because of COVID. Those types of masks are the mask to use. So we've probably now got them in our suitcase and in our glove box. So airway protection in the most basic sense is what we use for COVID. You can get better masks and you can research that by Googling. There are better masks for smoke. But the base level would be what we do for COVID.

The other thing though is on a fire day it's hot. You don't really want to be travelling far on a hot day and if you can see smoke you want to turn away from smoke. So those things are just situational awareness. Why am I travelling in the heat of the day? Although you got to be careful, a fire doesn't always just run at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Situational awareness is critical and the other thing is knowing what local radio stations to tune into. Quite often we'll put in the music stack from my phone but you miss the local content then. So to tune into local radio stations I think is one of the best. And to make sure you've got information on your phone. Traveling is about being prepared to listen and being prepared to put yourself in a different environment. So you need to have different inputs to what the information you get.

## **Malcolm**

I've got a question which I guess follows up your grassfire comment. The locals say there hasn't been a fire through here for decades. In an El Nino year what should we do to prepare for the fire season?

## **Craig**

I think Malcolm it's all the things we've talked about plus good fire prevention. Removing and being tidy around our properties. Municipalities and road authorities should be tidy around their properties, we've all got a partnership in it. And if it needs be you need to follow up. Because there'll always be regrowth or a change of circumstances. So what you're doing October,

November needs to be followed up in December, January and so on. So just don't think by doing it once is enough, you need to keep on top of these things and maintain what you do.

And if there's something of concern that isn't your responsibility talk to the appropriate authorities, and I know that sometimes people go "Look I've rung them 10 times it still hasn't got done." But make sure you do report what you think is important to report and have that discussion with the authorities about what they do and why they're going to do what they're going to do. Get the logic, understand the logic of what they're up to. And I'll just say that in a sense that quite often the road authorities they'll wait and do one really good mow and then come back possibly with a second mow. It defeats a little bit what I just said about following up. But sometimes they haven't got the luxury of being able to do the second or third mow. But they may be a little bit late but they may be waiting till the peak period to do it. But don't just assume they're going to do it. If you concerned report it, it's important.

### **Danielle**

The other thing I'd add is in El Nino years even in an environment of climate changes be prepared for the unexpected. So just because there's never been a fire before or because things have always happened in a particular way in the past, we can't assume that what's going to happen in the future. We'll get winds from different directions that we weren't expecting, we'll get fires happening at times of years when we weren't expecting them. We always used to think we were safe where we are to go away in December. We can't go away in December now because the fires are starting earlier. So we have to be prepared for things to be different to what they were in the past in a changing climate.

### **Malcolm**

How do we identify our capacity and capability when preparing for the fire season? How do we do that? And secondly there are many older people in our area who are proudly independent. How can we convince them to realistically address their limitations in a respectful way, Parvathi, you got any ideas on that one?

### **Parvathi**

I'm happy to tackle the second part of that question because it's definitely something that comes up a lot. It's also part of the reason why we start that P-CEP conversation talking about strengths because it gives you the opportunity to acknowledge those strengths and acknowledge that lived experience as well. And then I think when you move to the actions that someone is going to take where you can encourage someone to be as descriptive and practical as possible will help them to see how feasible their ideas are. It's important the person you're having this conversation with is in the driver's seat, because at the end of the day they're going to be the person that needs to enact this plan.

So rather than imposing what your perceived limitations of that person are on them instead try and be curious and unpack. Some of those things we've already talked about today around what would happen if this was the case instead? Or what would happen in this scenario? How comfortable or confident do you feel to handle that? And we want to set people up for success and we want to support people as well so it's not about saying they're actually not independent it's about them self-reflecting and self-assessing how prepared they are. And it won't feel like a power struggle if you're walking with the person on that journey and going through that process with them around that self-assessment and that identification. It will feel like a power struggle and they'll come back at you harder if it feels like you see them in a way that they don't see themselves if that makes sense.

**Malcolm**

Thank you Craig Parvathi and Danielle for what I think was a really valuable discussion. Certainly insights we haven't had in the past. And I'm sure that Parvathi you've got people thinking about that set of tools and possibly over the course that they could do if they want to know more.