

Safety actions for the fire season

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Presenter: Steve Pascoe



Chair

Our 2022 subscribers clearly showed the number one topic they wanted BRI to provide information about was bushfire plans and checklists. Bushfire plans are given different names by fire agencies. BRI uses Bushfire Safety Plan. We separate the plan into two parts.

A preparation plan: a series of actions you take before the summer and during the summer to reduce risk. This was the topic in Webinar 2 in August.

A fire event plan are the actions that you need to take before a bad fire danger rating day, on the day and during an event. That's the topic of tonight's webinar.

The subject matter experts in our webinar on physical and emotional preparation in 2021 clearly showed the significant advantages of a written practised plan.

<https://bushfireresilience.org.au/webinar-recordings/2021-webinar-3/> This is a very relevant topic for tonight's webinar.

Our first presenter is Steve Pascoe, who's actually a neighbour of mine in Strathewen. A recording of the interview with Steve of his experiences on Black Saturday 2009 is included on the BRI website <https://bushfireresilience.org.au/interview/pascoe-steve/?highlight=%22steve%20pascoe%22>. It's pretty compelling and there's a lot of detail there because we had plenty of time to talk. Steve has worked in community centred bushfire safety education for many years. He and his family followed their plan to stay with their property on Black Saturday. He'll talk about what others can learn from his lived experience of staying.

Jamie McKenzie runs programs to help people prepare survive and thrive during adversity. Tonight he'll discuss having a plan to leave and a plan if you can't leave.

Craig Lapsley is tonight's final presenter. One of the world's most experienced operational and strategic fire and public safety leaders. He's going to talk about planning, preparing and practising like your life depends on it.

Steve will now present his personal experience of staying to defend his home during the Black Saturday bushfires. Welcome Steve.

Steve

Thanks Malcolm. Hi folks and thanks to BRI for putting these events on. The information you get from these events you won't get anywhere else because of a whole bunch of reasons.

I'll be talking about planning for a bad bushfire day. There have been other webinars about what to do before the start of the fire season and things you need to plan for. But I'll be talking about what is involved in planning to stay with your property, and if that's your intention how do you plan for that? That was my family's plan in Strathewen. It worked. It didn't work the way we'd hoped. We did lose our house, but we learned a whole bunch of things and we survived quite well which I'll talk a bit about.

So why plan? I've put this first doc point in because we have had a few wet years and we've all dropped our guard a little bit which is fine. I think that's having a few years off and not being stressed. This year has started very oddly. We've had a very dry September and the last 3-4 weeks have been quite hot. So the world has changed around. I think El Nino has kicked in and it could be here for a few years. So getting your plans going now is a really good idea. It's not a waste of time even if this year doesn't turn out to be as it might be. It's likely that the next few years will be. And we know that a series of bad years is what ends up in catastrophe.

The amount of work that needs to be done is enormous once you sit down and start looking around your property. What do I need? Where do I need to reduce fuel loads around my property? Look into dark spaces and find a little litter and the bits of wood under the house and all that sort of stuff. And if you're planning to stay then pumps, hoses and petrol supplies, and all those things. You practise your own personal protection. You're fit enough. All those things come into it so it takes a lot of time and you need to start early.

Planning to leave is not the easy option. A lot of people go "I don't know what to do and it's too hard. So I'll just leave when I feel it's the right thing." It's not easy. You'll find it's very challenging. Very confusing. There are lots of things to do. If you haven't thought of something, if you haven't developed a plan you'll end up in a position where you go round and round in circles and you'll grab stuff and put them in the car that is largely irrelevant. And having lost everything we owned I'll tell you that most of the stuff you try and put in your car is largely irrelevant. You, your kids, your friends, and your pets go in the car. And if you can fit something else that's a good idea.

Leaving at the last minute is a deadly option. We've been saying this for many many years. It is just not an option. Getting on the road when there's a fire in the area is just nonsensical. It doesn't work. You'll be enormously stressed and it's just not a fun thing to do. So don't do it. Have a plan for something positive. A good plan will have most of the work and effort done before the bad fire day. I know of people who ended up staying with their house and deciding they needed to do all the work at that time. They were mowing grass when smoke was hanging over them and the fire's coming, they're cleaning gutters they're doing all sorts of things that they should have done before. And while they're running around doing that stuff they're actually not doing what they should be doing which is looking after themselves and protecting the house itself.

Leaving your decisions and actions to the last minute will fail. I have no doubt. It's absolutely certain and you need to be aware of that. Do not think that you can figure it out at the last minute and it will be okay. It won't be. Even if you survive the trauma you'll suffer from going through that. I've spoken to lots of people who survived accidentally and it affects their life. We talk about written plans. I've been encouraged to see that lots of people actually have written plans now but that's a rarity. It needs to be a simple written thing. I'll talk a bit about planning to stay. Maybe five pages. Big dot points and simple sentences so you can look at it and go "This is what I need to do now."

Just to get your mind in the right place we now get warnings about "It's now too late to leave." If you leave everything to the last minute what does that mean to you? What does it now mean when

it says it is now too late to leave? You comfy with that? Is that a happy thing? Are you going, "That's okay. I was intending to stay"? Or are you in a place where this wasn't your plan and you don't know what to do now? And not having a plan is leaving your life to chance. It is absolutely a toss of the coin whether you your family and other people live or die. So really think about that. Don't do it by chance. Do it deliberately.

A bit of my background. I've spent a lot of my working life in community safety and bushfire education. I've worked extensively in communities and spent a fair bit of time in Mallacoota after their fires helping them with their recovery efforts.

On February 7th 2009 my wife and my 24 year old daughter and I survived on our property. Despite our house burning down we were able to stay safe. But we were down to plan D by the time we were safe.

This was our house when we bought it in 1990. And this is what it looked like a couple of weeks after Black Saturday. It was our first visit back to the property which was fairly horrendous. We walked away from this scene literally in the clothes we were wearing with our two dogs.

There's some great things to learn, there's some obvious mistakes, and there's some things that worked well. Some observations and learning's from Black Saturday. What I came to realize is that on catastrophic bushfire days the fires are completely out of control. They won't be suppressed. They won't be stopped. They will go until the weather changes or they run out of stuff to burn. And being in that situation. being in the middle of one of those which I didn't realize. I thought it was just a local fire. But everything can go wrong will go wrong. The things that you thought were going to be okay aren't. The pump you thought would probably work doesn't. The hoses you thought were going to be fine aren't. The water supply runs out. The house catches fire in places you hadn't expected. And pretty much everything goes wrong.

One of the things that went wrong was I brought all the cars up around the house so we could protect them. They caught fire and actually threatened the house. So probably one of the dumbest things in hindsight. I should have parked them in the paddock and if they burnt they burnt. Lots of people who parked their cars in paddocks the cars didn't burn. No it was not a sensible thing to do.

What worked for us? Using the house as a place of shelter worked brilliantly. It's a mud brick house and it has huge radiant heat protection, huge flame protection. It's a large volume of air so we had no trouble breathing. We had torches. It was completely pitch black at 4 o'clock in the afternoon in summer. Various other things worked. We had our personal protective clothing which worked fine - dust masks, eye protection and hats was what we needed.

What didn't work? Ultimately when the house caught fire up on the ridge beam I went outside to get a hose with some water which was still a safe thing to do. But there was no water. The petrol pump wasn't working so we had no water supply. In hindsight it was one of the dumbest things I did was not building some protection around the pump itself. I now have a pump house which is protected with sprinklers. Why did the pump stop? I suspect the air overheated and caused it to mess up the fuel mixture and so it stopped. Other possibility is that the air filter actually melted and turned into a piece of plastic rather than a nice foam filter.

One of the clear observations through research and personal experiences it's not good for children to experience a life threatening event. Perhaps kids over 12 okay. But young children just shouldn't go through this. It does change their perspective on life. It does have impacts for them for many

years. And it's particularly hard for children to see their parents not coping well. So if you have young children you really need to think about where you're going to go on serious fire days and how to make that decision.

An observation. Newer houses do better than older houses. That's because newer houses have less crap in their roof and in their gutters and all sorts of other things. Our old house was 40 years old. Had lots I imagine of bits and pieces and cobwebs and leaf litter under the ridge cap, under the eaves and places that I couldn't get to.

Also it was the end of a 13 year drought and the whole frame of the house was so dried out, so desiccated that it was just about kindling anyway. Another observation. Houses on hills are at greater risk than those in valleys. If you've got a house on the hill you're at a greater risk. Why? Because you're very exposed to the wind. You're on top of the hill. The vegetation around you will be drier and the heat from fires comes up the hill quite quickly. The heat before the fire actually gets to you will be impacting your house. And when the fire actually arrives it will be pre heated to the point where it's fairly easy to ignite.

The work done before the fire day is critical. You can't do it at the last minute. And it's a lot, a lot of work. Planning is essential. Whether you're planning to stay or planning to go. Wait and see is not an option. I've noticed on some of the responses to the questionnaire tonight there are still some people who think that wait and see will be okay. It's not. So really have a definite plan about what you're going to do and when you're going to do it. Sure it's a bit hard to find information as to how to do that. Hopefully BRI will do some more of that stuff next year and we'll build a bigger and better picture about how to make those decisions.

Some considerations in planning to stay with your property during a bushfire. Catastrophic days are extreme risk to houses and lives. I can't say it any more simply than that. Justin Leonard says some similar things. All bets are off on catastrophic days. It is beyond our science. It is beyond capacity of fire services to manage. Like I said the fires will burn until the weather changes or it runs out of things to burn, and houses are very vulnerable. There is no house built to modern standards for catastrophic days. It stops working at about fire danger index of 100 (the top end of a fire danger rating of Extreme). And that's when catastrophic days start. Lives are at extreme risk. And it's not just being in front of a fire. It's actually superheated air which makes it impossible to breathe, to see and all sorts of other things. So catastrophic days are really bad and you need to have great plans. Not being home is one of the better ones.

So is your home capable of being a bushfire shelter? Have a look at it. Does it meet the standards of a bushfire shelter? Can it withstand radiant heat and flames, or do you have those things near your house? What is the combustible material? What risks are you prepared to take? And I'll show a picture of our house later. It still has a lot of timber in it and it's a nice house and I enjoy it nearly every day of my life. Sometime in the future it may end up the same way as the old house.

We had a plan A. Like I said we went through Plan B and Plan C and we were down to plan D by the time we were finished. What are your options if plan A fails? What are you going to do when what you thought would work doesn't work? In those bad situations it most certainly won't work. So have a think about what Plan B is. What do you do when what you thought was going to happen doesn't happen?

What about your pets and large domestic animals? Pets are easier. You can keep them in a safe place in the house so they don't run around and you can find them. You can leave with them in

your car if necessary if that's your plan. But not too late. Large domestic animals I don't think anyone has a great answer for. Three of our horses died. We still have horses on our property now and I still don't have a good plan for what to do with them in a bushfire. Basically they'll just have to take their chances. It's important that everyone in the household knows the plan and practising will reveal all the things that won't work. So everyone should know your discussions and practise it.

So what a stay with your property plan might look like. Everyone should have a "at the start of the fire season" page. This will work whether you're staying with your property or whether you're not staying with your property. If you can do lots of work around your property before you leave there's a chance that your house will still be there when you get back. If you don't do anything you need to have really good insurance. And be prepared to go through the misery of arguing with insurance companies and rebuilding your house and going through different architects and different builders. We went through three architects and three builders before we got our new house.

This is the big page. This is the page that will have most of the actions on it. But try and fit it all on one page. Large print dot points one sentence for each action. Then another page that will be on bad bushfire days. And this might be 10 actions about moving your animals around, checking fuel in the pumps, running out hoses, checking where everyone is, letting your family know what's happening and where you're going to be. All those things.

Then another page which is when a fire is in your area. So it goes down to about five actions and that's about retreating into the house, putting sprinklers on, bring horses into the house if we can. All those things. Quite simple. We retreat into the house as a place of safety.

And when the fire is at your house. And in our plan it has three actions which is patrol around inside the house looking for embers and ignitions, drink lots of water and give each other a hug.

And there's a plan for after the fire has passed. And that might be things about going outside and putting out small ignitions, drinking water and then giving yourself a really big hug. Stick it on the fridge over summer. Print this out. Five pages. Big font. Dot points. Stick it on the fridge and that's where everyone can see it and that's where it is.

This is our house now. It's the sort of house we like. We ended up building a mud brick house. It still has timber amongst it. It still has risks but we have separation from the garden. We have a lot of other things going on. I've built a proper pump shed for my fire pump. I've doubled up the number of water systems we have so we've got lots of contingencies. I've got a generator for when everything else fails. I can start that and the electric pumps will work.

To finish off. Would I do it again? Yes absolutely. But I'm 15 years older than I was in 2009. And the day is coming fairly rapidly when I need to not do this. I need to plan to not be here. It's coming very shortly and our plan will change.

How do I feel about what we did? I personally am in a much better mental place. I knew exactly what happened. I know we did the best job we could. I know that I have no what ifs and we survived quite comfortably. At no point did I think that we were actually in danger of dying or of even being harmed. It worked very well. Our plan worked well apart from being down to plan D. So it is possible. It is worthwhile but it's a lot of work and you have to be pretty competent and capable.

Chair Thanks Steve