

Community-based bushfire management in Victoria

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Community-based bushfire management is a project in the Victorian Safer Together program. It takes a community-development approach to bushfire risk reduction and builds respectful, trusting relationships to identify mutual values, local assets and strengths and strategies to reduce bushfire risk.

Community-based bushfire management (CBBM) is a model of community development, with bushfire risk reduction as its ultimate objective. The CBBM model of community engagement departs from traditional bushfire education models of providing information and takes a community-development approach. The Safer Together program is a multi-agency collaboration created following the Lancefield-Cobaw fire in 2015.¹ A post-fire report made recommendations relating to agency interoperability of land and fire management. This included that agencies and local governments work closely with community members in management and planning issues, as well as bushfire risk reduction.²

Based on previous positive experiences of community-based approaches by the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and others, CBBM was chosen due to the community's critical role. Each community (and the approaches they choose to take to bushfire risk reduction) are unique. As CBBM is community-led, it allows intense collaboration with community members on matters related to bushfire.

Currently, there are 20 CBBM communities involved with the Safer Together program. The characteristics of each vary, as do the values, priorities and approaches identified by community members and participants. These communities are assisted by a team of eight facilitators. CBBM operates under principles of:

- inclusivity – all those who are interested in joining in CBBM should be welcomed
- openness and transparency – there are no hidden agendas
- respect – participation must be based on respect for others; their experiences and perspectives
- honesty – all stakeholders must engage in good faith on the basis that everyone is trying to do their best to strengthen relationships, build understanding, find effective solutions and work for the benefit of the community

- flexibility – CBBM adapts to suit the needs of those involved
- clarity of purpose – activities should have clearly stated aims and an explanation of what is involved so people can make their own decisions
- positivity and constructiveness – participants must have the right attitude
- evidence-based – decisions and actions need to be based on plausible explanation and evidence, recognising that community experience and knowledge are valid forms of evidence.

While CBBM is an effective means to reduce local bushfire risk and increase community resilience, it is not a model of engagement that is suitable for all communities. As such, CBBM communities are chosen in accordance with three principles:

- community readiness to embrace and participate in CBBM
- agency and local government readiness to embrace and participate in CBBM
- high level of local bushfire risk.

CBBM focuses on the development of trusting relationships. This means all those involved in the process (community members, emergency management participants, local government and community group representatives as well as others) must genuinely listen to each another, respect diverse views and be willing to learn from one another. By valuing group diversity, a richer understanding of local issues and participant concerns can be developed. This, in turn, helps to identify the values and priorities of the group. By working this way, CBBM participants determine suitable local plans and processes to reduce bushfire risk.

¹ Safer Together. At: www.safertogether.vic.gov.au.

² Inspector-General for Emergency Management Final Report. At: www.iffm.vic.gov.au/history-and-incidents/lancefield-cobaw.

Despite groups identifying activities to reduce their local bushfire risk, other groups have focused on having meaningful local conversations that strengthen relationships and trust. Enhanced relationships lead to greater community resilience, particularly in the face of challenges such as bushfire.

A most notable example is the St Andrews Conversations project.³ In 2017, a Social Network Analysis of the St Andrews Conversations project revealed the CBBM process created significant trust and meaningful relationships for those directly involved in the project. This analysis also revealed that participants believed the project had reach and impact on the community beyond those directly involved in the project.

Other reviews of CBBM in 2017 and 2019 revealed significant positive effects associated with the process. In 2017, the review identified several positive outcomes:

- The development of trusting relationships.
- The commencement of local bushfire risk-reduction initiatives.
- Evidence of community leadership to address bushfire risk.

The 2019 review revealed many similar findings to the 2017 review. Some additional outcomes include:

- that the CBBM community-led approach is fundamental to the project's success
- strengthening and re-defining relationships across and within the community and between agencies has built networks and trust
- an effective multi-agency partnership approach is perceived by participants as important and participants identified a change in the way CBBM communities and agency staff collaborate
- leadership and support from regional Country Fire Authority and Victorian Government managerial staff is important
- an increase in community involvement in bushfire management because CBBM operates in different ways for participating communities and achievements are based on locally defined goals and activities
- an increase in community awareness of bushfire risk in communities participating in CBBM
- investment of local government resources as well as local government connections with other agencies and communities.

People involved with CBBM recognise it is a fundamental shift in the way emergency management agencies and local government interact with communities. CBBM moves away from informing the community and builds connections to reduce bushfire risk. While the reviews of the program articulate the success of the approach to bushfire risk reduction, quotes from participants reveal different perspectives.

What's key is helping residents understand the part they can, and must play, to build a safer community.

[CBBM] is exciting. This is the way I have been hoping and encouraging CFA to engage for years.

Did you notice that everyone was listening to each other?

We'll work together because we don't want to miss an opportunity to change things.

What I liked about the group dynamics was the respect people showed each other.

With the right knowledge the community will accomplish far more than fire services ever could alone.

This is actually about life and death – we need to work together to prevent deaths.

CBBM requires a willingness from the community to embrace the concepts and participate in the process. Likewise, emergency management agencies and local government must be ready and willing to participate. Communities must also be exposed to a suitable level of bushfire risk. To be successful, CBBM requires a skilled facilitator who understands the nuances required to make this a successful process. Facilitators often do well when they remove the uniform and participate as a neutral entity who does not have allegiances or agendas.

Evaluation has shown the benefits of CBBM. These positive effects are far-reaching and are testament to the effectiveness of a community-based approach. Community members respond positively to having decision-making and leadership powers. Most importantly, the development of trust and respect has widespread benefits within communities generally.

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³ St Andrews Conversations video, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQy29Uf_bXs&t=6s.