

Bushfire arson prevention: a community centred approach in Western Australia

Bushfire arson is problematic across all states and territories of Australia. While the vast majority of deliberately lit fires are typically small, the cumulative impact on the community and environment is significant: adversely affecting the quality of lives of people within close proximity; potentially endangering property via ember attacks; wasting valuable firefighting resources; and drastically impacting on the health and biodiversity of remnant vegetation in or near urban areas which have not evolved to cope with the frequency of fires to which they are subjected.

In an unprecedented attempt to tackle bushfire arson in Western Australia, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) has implemented a targeted campaign that combines the strengths of education with community participation to significantly reduce the incidence of bushfire arson in the state. The nature of this program including the underlying basis, the targeting strategies, and its effectiveness are presented in Smith (2004), and summarised here.

FESA recognised that firesetting is often undertaken by children and others who may be unaware of, or have not considered the possible consequences of their actions, and that although the fires lit by young children are deliberate, they are not typically malicious in nature. Initially, FESA analysed and reviewed bushfire statistics and through geospatial analysis identified major physical features that may attract firefighters within problematic fire-prone areas, and consulted widely across agencies to develop effective strategies to reduce the incidence of arson.

A joint agency approach incorporating FESA, the police force and the Department of Education and Training, was then tasked with delivering a multifaceted program to target children in primary schools, the adults who are their primary carers, and the local community. The campaign incorporated three elements:

- *School education*: this covered the inappropriateness of bushfires, and explained the social and environmental consequences of unauthorised firesetting.
- *Static displays in shopping centres*: including posters and specific relevant local information, staffed by FESA and when possible, uniformed police and fire officers.
- *Door knocking* of all houses within the target area promoting the program message 'help us help you'. Fridge magnets and information flyers with a relevant bushfire reduction message were left at houses not attended during the door knock.

The net result has been that bushfire numbers have declined and not returned to pre-targeting levels. This program demonstrates the beneficial results that can be achieved when the community and government agencies work together to break the cycle of bushfire arson, with resulting benefits for the community, fire agencies and the environment. With appropriate benchmarking to allow evaluation, and research into the specific issues relevant to each jurisdiction, such campaigns could be applied elsewhere.

References

Smith RD 2004. Community centred bush fire (arson) reduction. *Are we prepared for future challenges?: 11th Annual AFAC Conference and Inaugural Bushfire CRC Conference, 7–9 October 2004, Perth*. Western Australia. West Perth: Conference Secretariat.