3rd Human Dimensions of Wildland Fire Conference, Seattle 17-19 April

Special session

'Shared responsibility for community wildfire safety in Australia: What it is, how we do it and how we might do it better.'

This special session critically examines the idea and practice of 'shared responsibility' in Australian community wildfire/bushfire safety. A principle of shared responsibility that promotes a 'whole-of-society' approach to wildfire management has wide support at the national policy level. Yet what this principle might look like in practice is far less clear. While the focus of this session is on Australia, it considers important challenges shared by fire agencies in other countries, and presents a range of perspectives that are not commonly brought together in this field.

Key issues considered include:

- The different faces of 'shared responsibility' under changing national policy frameworks;
- Spatial planning to support better management of bushfire risk in the context of climate change;
- Legal and policy measures that might inform stakeholders on their reasonable share of the fire management responsibility;
- Local government support and coordination for sustaining informal community-driven wildfire preparedness activities.

Session Papers

Paper One:

From risk to resilience? Reframing shared responsibility in Australian disaster policy

Authors: Dr Blythe McLennan and Prof John Handmer

Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT University

Paper Two:

Sharing responsibility with governments and their agencies

Authors: Dr Michael Eburn and Prof Stephen Dovers

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Paper Three:

Spatial planning, wildfire risk and climate change: shared responsibility and adaptive capacity to build resilience

Authors: Dr Kate Sullivan and Professor Barbara Norman

Urban and Regional Planning, University of Canberra

Paper Four:

Community adaptation to wildfire in a changing climate: developing a toolkit for local government

Authors: Dr Susan Chaplin and Prof Peter Fairbrother

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From risk to resilience? Reframing shared responsibility in Australian disaster policy

This paper critically analyses the principle of shared responsibility in Australian disaster policy rhetoric from a framing perspective. This principle is one that has circulated in community bushfire/wildfire safety policy discourse in Australia since the 1990s. In broad terms, it reflects recognition that the success of community bushfire safety relies on a range of parties contributing to the various activities that – collectively – can reduce risk, increase safety and foster resilience.

The shared responsibility principle has recently gained renewed traction in the broader arena of disaster management through the findings of the Victorian 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission and the release of the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR) in February 2011. The NSDR is a particularly important policy initiative that aims to shift Australia's approach to disaster management from a focus on responding to hazard events to a more proactive and holistic 'whole-of-society' approach that places considerably more emphasis on preparedness than in the past.

The NSDR has the potential to steer an important and long-awaited paradigm shift in Australian disaster policy from a 'risk' to a 'resilience' frame. This paper argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the very different nature of responsibility-sharing for disaster management under a resilience frame compared to one centered on risk. In particular, moving from a risk to a resilience frame involves a fundamental change in the way that collective action, agency and capacity are conceptualized in the context of disaster management. This has major implications for the way that institutions to share responsibility – both formal and informal – are to be understood and structured.

Significantly, this situation creates the potential for frame conflict centered on different understandings of the principle of shared responsibility – particularly within the fire and emergency services sector. This conflict could become a significant barrier to converting the rhetoric of disaster resilience into action. In order to avoid this frame conflict and support the goals of the NSDR, the principle of shared responsibility needs to be critically re-examined in disaster management and recast in a way that is coherent with the emerging resilience frame.

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Sharing responsibility with governments and their agencies.

The inquiry into the 2009 Victorian 'Black Saturday' bushfires called for 'the State, municipal councils, individuals, household members and the broader community' to accept their share of responsibility for managing the risk posed by bushfire.[1] At the same time, the Commission called for the protection of human life to be the paramount consideration in fire policy.[2] How those considerations are to be balanced has proved difficult. A review of the 2011 Western Australia fires found that the use of mass evacuations, although ensuring no lives was lost, was inconsistent with the model of shared responsibility – communities are not encouraged to take their share of responsibility for hazard mitigation 'if they believe the default response to an emergency is to evacuate.'[3] Implementation of shared responsibility must be done in the context of cultural and legal norms including constitutional limits on legislative and executive power as well as expectations about the role of government, the right of people to make their own autonomous choices and the value of private property rights.

This paper will report on research being conducted by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre and the Australian National University on how the fire and emergency services perceive their place in the shared responsibility spectrum. Drawing on interviews with chief officers from services across the nation, the research asks 'what is, [or should be] the measure of success of the outcome of a bushfire'[4] and can, or should, legal and policy measures be put in place to provide clearly articulated aims and objectives to inform the community and emergency managers on what is their reasonable share of the fire management responsibility?

Practitioners and academics from countries that share a common law background and a federal system of government, such as Australia, Canada and the United States, can be informed by comparing experiences in developing and implementing policy across local, state and federal jurisdictions. This paper will contribute to the mutual exchange of ideas and 'lessons learned' in encouraging everyone to accept responsibility for hazard management.

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[1]   Victoria, 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, *Final Report* (2010), Vol II, Pt II, 352.
[2]   Ibid Vol I, xxviii
[3]   Keelty M, A Shared Responsibility: The Report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review (Government of Western Australia, Perth) 42.
[4]   Ibid, 3.

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Spatial planning, wildfire risk and climate change: shared responsibility and adaptive capacity to build resilience

The *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience: Building our Nation's Resilience to Disasters*, adopted in February 2011, provides the most recent policy setting for bushfire and disaster risk management in Australia.[5] It establishes two critical policy directions: firstly, that disaster risk management is a "whole-of-government" responsibility, requiring policy integration across sectors, agencies and levels of government;[6] and, secondly, that disaster risk management is more fundamentally a whole-of-society responsibility—that is, "a shared responsibility across the whole of society", encompassing governments, businesses, not-for-profit organisations, communities and individuals.[7]

In this context, spatial planning has an increasingly significant contribution to make in managing bushfire risk, with the planning and urban policy sector at national, state and local levels therefore taking a critical place in the shared responsibility spectrum. Integration of spatial planning and bushfire risk is regarded as a policy priority in Australia, with a landmark national report on natural disaster management recently identifying "land use planning which takes into account natural hazard risks", including bushfire risk, as the "single most important mitigation measure in preventing future disaster losses in areas of new development".[8]

Spatial planning is also recognised as providing a significant policy lever for managing climate change impacts,[9] with climate change expected to increase bushfire risk.[10] However, a problem identified in synthesis research being conducted by the University of Canberra, supported by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, is that bushfire/disaster risk management and climate adaptation are frequently viewed as separate areas of policy and academic interest. Drawing on this research, the paper will report on some significant synergies between the concept of 'shared responsibility' in disaster risk management and the concept of 'adaptive capacity' in climate adaptation. It explores how spatial planning can usefully bring these concepts together, particularly at regional and local scales, towards better managing bushfire risk in the context of climate change and,

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5   NEMC, 2011 (COAG, Canberra).

6   *Ibid* 7.

7   *Ibid* 3.

8   COAG High Level Group, 2002 *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming Mitigation, Relief and Recovery Arrangements* (Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra) 17.

9   Newman P, Beatley T, Boyer H, 2009 *Resilient Cities: Responding to Peak Oil and Climate Change* (Island Press, Washington); Norman B, 2010 *A Low Carbon and Resilient Urban Future: an Integrated Approach to Planning for Climate Change* Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency (Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra); OECD, 2010 *Cities and Climate Change* OECD Publishing

10   IPCC, 2007 *Climate Change 2007—Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* Eds M Parry, O Canziani, J Palutikof, P van der Linden, C Hanson CE (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).

more broadly, building resilient communities and progressing sustainability goals. Future visioning of bushfire risk and climate change impacts at the local scale through modelling a range of socioeconomic, climate and risk scenarios offers a useful framework for engaging the community in possible futures for their region.[11]

While there is an increasing call for policy integration in terms of disaster risk management and climate adaptation,[12] research to date has not explored synergies between shared responsibility and adaptive capacity in policy integration of disaster risk management and climate adaptation, or looked at this area through the 'planning lens'. Spatial planning is well placed to progress policy integration of bushfire risk management and climate adaptation in order to build adaptive capacity and shared responsibility for community wildfire safety into the future.

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[11]   Norman B, Sullivan K, 2011, "Planning for risk and uncertainty: new approaches for managing urban growth", paper presented at the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council and Bushfire Cooperative Research Centres Conference 2011, Sydney http://knowledgeweb.afac.com.au/conference/day3/presentations.

[12]   Mercer J, 2010, "Disaster Risk Reduction or Climate Change Adaptation: Are We Reinventing the Wheel? *Journal of International Development* 22, 247 – 264.

Community adaptation to wildfire in a changing climate: developing a toolkit for local government

Like many rural-urban interface areas in Australia, the Kingborough and Huon Valley council areas in south eastern Tasmania are experiencing rapid demographic and socio-economic changes. This is creating very diverse communities and exposing increasing numbers of people to the risk of wildfire at a time when the predictions from current climate modelling suggest as much as a 50 percent increase in the incidence of extreme fire weather during this century. As a result, there is now significant urgency in raising the level of wildfire preparedness and facilitating community adaptation to these changing climatic conditions.

Research conducted by the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work, RMIT University, for the two councils, has identified possible approaches to how communities can be engaged to increase their knowledge, awareness and understanding of wildfire risk. The argument is that individual engagement in wildfire preparedness and awareness takes place via an involvement with other community members through informal networks. Of particular significance is the finding that many individuals are engaging with other community members through such informal networks to increase household preparedness. These activities frequently rely on informal discussions with friends, neighbours and colleagues to pass along knowledge about local environmental conditions, preparedness measures and wildfire experience. If these community preparedness activities are to be sustainable, and become examples of shared responsibility for managing the risks of wildfire, they must be supported and coordinated by local government because this level of government is the political institution that deals directly with communities. The data for this research is based on interviews with 51 residents, analysis of policy documents and statements and a review of current research in Australia and North America.

These residents are in fact members of multiple communities in which they may share a locality, a sense of belonging and/or be part of a social network which connects people with shared interests that may extend beyond their locality.[13] All these different aspects of community need to be considered and integrated into the development of a program for local government that will revolve around volunteer-based efforts to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding of bushfire risk amongst residents living in bushfire prone areas.

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[13] Phillips, R, Chaplin, S., Fairbrother, F., Mees, B., Toh, K., & Tyler, M., 2011, "Defining community: debates and implications for bushfire policy", Fire Note 88, October www.bushfirecrc.com

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Blythe is a Research Fellow in emergency management with RMIT University's Centre for Risk and Community Safety in Melbourne. She is a human geographer with an interest in working across research disciplines and between research and practice to support decision-making for complex environmental and sustainability issues. Blythe currently works on a project with the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre that aims to support the Australian fire and emergency management sector to make decisions about sharing responsibility for community safety and disaster resilience. Her PhD, completed in 2009 at the University of Alberta in Canada, examined how globalization influenced environmental policy-making and land use management in Costa Rica.

Dr Michael Eburn

Dr Michael Eburn is a Senior Research Fellow in the Fenner School of Environment and Society and the ANU College of Law at the Australian National University. He is engaged on a three year research project looking at the impact of law and policy on fire management. Michael is the author of Emergency Law (3rd ed, 2010, Federation Press), and a number of articles dealing with the law and emergency response. His PhD research formed the basis of a report published by the International Red Cross' International Disaster Response Law project, detailing Australia's legal arrangements for sending and receiving international disaster assistance.

Dr Kate Sullivan

Dr Kate Sullivan is a Senior Research Fellow in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Canberra. Her research interests include coastal planning; spatial planning for climate risk, emergency management and disaster resilience; climate change adaptation; environmental law; and sustainable cities. Kate has over 15 years experience in the public sector, including executive positions in the Australian Parliament and Department of Industry and Science. Kate is currently conducting a research project, with funding from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, on integrating spatial planning, bushfire risk and emergency management in the context of climate change. Her PhD, from the Australian National University, was in cultural theory, with relevance to the social dimensions of urban and regional planning.

Dr Susan Chaplin

Susan Chaplin is based in Melbourne Australia at the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work, RMIT University. She is currently a member of a research team that is examining the social, political and historical bases of community awareness and resilience in bushfire contexts. In particular the research focuses on the intersection between community, institutions and organisations in relation to communication. The project, "Effective Communication: Communities and Bushfire' is funded by the Bushfire CRC. Previously she has worked on issues of urban development, vulnerable populations, displacement and climate change adaptation in India.