

WOMEN ON FIRE

A series of seven workshops were held in mid-September 2015 as part of the Cross Property Planning project. Workshops were held at Illabo, Eurongilly, Downside, Junee Reefs, Old Junee, Humula and Ladysmith.

The “Women on Fire” workshops were developed by Skye Bellamy and Maria Turner, of the Junee Area Landcare Network, and aimed to empower women to develop greater confidence and knowledge about how to protect their homes and families in the event of a bushfire.

The workshops were a great success, and attracted over 100 local women, many of whom had experience from several recent bushfires. Skye and Maria led a discussion of experiences with bushfires, and shared many useful tips for protecting and defending your home.



Above: Skye Bellamy presents to local women attending the Junee Reefs ‘Women on Fire’ workshop

The need to plan for a bush fire

James Smith of the NSW Rural Fire Service, provided some helpful tips at the workshops, and emphasised the need to prepare a plan and discuss it with your family. The RFS have produced a Bushfire Survival Plan guide, which takes you through the steps to reduce the risk to your family and home, and take actions to survive a bush fire, including the decision on whether to Leave Early or Stay and Defend. You can download a copy of this plan from the RFS website: www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/bush-fire-survival-plan, or contact the Wagga office on (02) 69 714 500 to request a hard copy.

The RFS have also produced a Farm Fire Wise Checklist and Action Plan. This guide takes you through a step-by-step process of developing a fire protection plan for your whole property, including the family home and all other assets across the farm. This document can be downloaded here: www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/9451/Guide-to-Farm-FireWise.pdf.

One of the points that was stressed in the workshops was the need for a plan, due to the stress which typically accompanies a bush fire situation, and the lack of time or ability to think clearly when a bushfire occurs. To give an indication of the impact the stress can have, James Smith recommended land holders watch the “Don’t panic” Catalyst video. This was a special edition of the ABC program, where ordinary families were put in a staged bushfire scenario, to watch how they would cope. You can watch the entire episode online, and also access some additional interesting bushfire-related features here: www.abc.net.au/catalyst/dontpanic.htm.

Bush fire survival kit

During the workshops, Skye showed everyone her Bushfire Survival Kit. This kit is simply a plastic tub containing all the things which you are likely to need in the event of a bushfire. Some suggested items to include are:

- Portable battery-operated radio
- Waterproof torch
- Spare batteries
- First aid kit with manual
- Candles with waterproof matches
- Woollen blankets
- Emergency contact numbers
- Waterproof bag for valuables.

In the event of a fire, you should get important items together in case you need to leave your property; these items could include:

- Cash, ATM cards, credit cards
- Medications, toiletries and sanitary supplies
- Special requirements for infants, elderly, injured, disabled
- Mobile phone and charger
- Combination pocket knife
- Important documents, valuables and photos (in a waterproof bag)
- Change of clothes for everyone
- Drinking water (at least three litres per person per day).

Bush fire checklist

Skye also went through her personal checklist of things to do when a bushfire is approaching. Having a one-page checklist, which can be stuck on the fridge (and/or some other handy prominent place around the home), can be extremely helpful as a quick reference during a fire event. A sample checklist is included on the final page, and can be adapted by adding/deleting steps relevant to your situation.



Left: James Smith of the NSW RFS explains how to prepare your house and garden for bush fire season, at the Eurongilly 'Women on Fire' workshop

Helpful resources for bush fires (and other emergencies)

Throughout the workshops, a number of smart phone “apps” which can be extremely helpful in bush fire emergencies were noted. The two key apps which were emphasised were:

- “*Emergency Plus*” app. This app was developed by Australia’s emergency services. It uses your phone’s GPS so you can provide the emergency services with your exact location. To get this app, go to the App store on your smart phone and search for “Emergency Plus”, then download it to your phone
- “*Fires Near Me*” app. This app provides a map showing all bush and grass fires attended by fire services and NSW RFS volunteers in NSW. You can click on any fire to see more information. To get this app, go to the App store on your smart phone and search for “Fires near me NSW”, then download it to your phone. It is also available as a website: www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/fire-information/fires-near-me.

If you don’t have a smart phone, or don’t have mobile coverage at your home, it may be a good idea to record the GPS location of your house, to provide to emergency services in the case of a bush fire or other emergency. You can do this through Google Maps (www.google.com.au/maps) by searching for your property and then clicking on your house. A box will pop up at the bottom of the screen, with a general address and then below this will be your GPS coordinates. Take note of these, and keep it near the phone!

Volunteering with the NSW Rural Fire Service

A key point which the workshops aimed to address was the role which women can play in the Rural Fire Service. Being involved with your local RFS is a great benefit for both men and women, giving you access to free training, protective clothing and equipment, and involvement with a local community network.

Skye is an active member of her local brigade, and emphasised the many roles which volunteers can play, in addition to (or instead of) being on the trucks in a fire. Roles such as logistical support, training, maintenance and communication are all important tasks which are required at each brigade.

If you are interested in learning more about joining the RFS, contact your local brigade directly. There is also some general information about volunteering with the RFS available here: www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/resources/publications/volunteering.

Static Water Supply (SWS) sign

If you have a static water supply on your property, such as a dam, tank or swimming pool, having a SWS sign on your gate will identify this for fire fighters needing water during a bush fire. This water will only be used as a last resort, but could be the difference in saving a home or property - maybe even your own.

To obtain a SWS sign, contact your local Brigade. More information is available here: www.fire.nsw.gov.au/gallery/files/pdf/factsheets/39_sws.pdf.

Further information

For further information about anything in this article, please contact Nicole Maher at Murrumbidgee Landcare: nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0438 452 814.

BUSH FIRE SURVIVAL CHECKLIST

ON DAYS OF INCREASED FIRE DANGER

- Contain pets so they can be easily found
- Move stock to well-cleared fenced-in areas, and ensure they have water and shade
- Make sure the pressure relief valves on LPG cylinders face outwards (so flame is not directed towards the house)
- Check water pumps and generators to make sure they are working
- Review your Bush Fire Survival Plan with your family, and have your Emergency Survival Kit and protective clothing ready
- Listen to the media for updates and information
- Talk to your neighbours, family and friends

AS SOON AS YOU BECOME AWARE THAT THERE IS A FIRE IN YOUR AREA

Leave Early

- Plan to leave early in the morning or the night before - leave LONG before you see flames!
- Decide on what your trigger to leave will be
- Prepare your pets and livestock
- Make sure you are going somewhere that is safer - you can call the RFS on 1800 NSW RFS

Stay and Defend

Before the fire impacts:

- Block your downpipes (eg a sock full of sand/soil) and fill your gutters with water
- Move flammable items (eg door mats, furniture, hanging plants) away from the house
- Do NOT stand on your roof with a hose. Hose down the roof from the ground or off a ladder
- Patrol the outside of your home, putting out any embers and spot fires
- Just before the fire arrives, wet down timber decks and gardens close to the house
- Move any fire-fighting equipment to a place where it will not get burnt

Inside the house:

- Ensure you drink plenty of water so you don't dehydrate
- Confine pets to one room inside the house
- Close doors, windows, vents and curtains to prevent flames, smoke & embers from entering
- Put tape across the inside of the windows so they stay in place if they break
- Shut off gas at the meter or bottle
- Move furniture away from windows to prevent any embers from igniting
- Fill bath, sinks and buckets with water for putting out any fires that may start inside
- Place wet towels around window and door edges to stop smoke and embers from entering

WHEN THE FIRE ARRIVES

- Go inside, shelter in a room on the opposite side of the house from the approaching fire, and that has a clear exit from the house
- Ensure you have torches ready as it is likely to become completely dark
- Patrol inside the house, including the roof space, for sparks and embers
- If your house catches fire and you cannot put it out, close all interior doors and shelter inside on the opposite side of the house from the approaching fire and close to an exit
- Leave the house when it is necessary and safe to do so

ONCE THE FIRE HAS PASSED

- Go outside and put out any part of your house which is alight
- Check under the house and any decks, as well as in the roof space
- You will need to keep patrolling your property for many hours, even days, after the fire has gone

