

Survival Lessons from Black Saturday

“Black Saturday” of 2009 in Victoria represents amongst the most extreme of fire events, with at least 173 deaths, many of which could possibly been avoided. Ongoing investigations and research have identified many factors which are believed to have contributed to both fatalities and survival.

Some lessons to be learnt (which are summarised below) are applicable to some degree to residents in any fire. Be reminded that we are not just preparing to safeguard homes. More importantly your lives and those of your families could be at risk. Some of your family may have little choice or control due to being young, old, or impaired in some way, and will be subject to the consequences of your preparations, decisions and actions.

Would you want their deaths on your conscience if you could have made a difference?

These and other lessons learnt will be explored in more detail as part of ongoing Bush Fire Ready Information and Education programmes provided to the public throughout the year. Please take the time and effort to become involved in these programmes, which will help you to prepare yourself, your families and your properties well in advance for the event of a Bush Fire.

Key messages are

- If Severe or above fire weather is forecast, seriously consider not being in higher risk areas for that day unless there is good reason to be there
- Even if you feel the need to stay consider relocating those more vulnerable to somewhere of significantly lower risk well in advance - this includes children, the elderly, physically and mentally impaired, and even pets.
- Don't rely on receiving timely warnings once a fire starts
- Don't rely on being able to evacuate once a fire starts
- Don't rely on getting assistance - emergency services may be delayed, find access impassable, or be overwhelmed by the scale of the fire/fires
- Have a well prepared house and defensible space around it, and make sure your fire fighting equipment is maintained and tested regularly
- Have well thought out plans, and backup plans with trigger points in case plan A fails

Some survivors commented that when they had a well thought out Bush Fire Survival Plan, they were so busy implementing it they didn't have the time to feel scared or to panic!

What worked for many – and believed to have saved lives

- Not being “In Harms Way” on the day ie being somewhere much safer
- Extensive preparation of homes and surrounds
- Fire fighting equipment well maintained and protected
- Being very familiar with operation of their fire fighting equipment
- Having backup plans
- Not evacuating late by road
- Pre identifying nearby low fuel areas and dams to which they could retreat if required
- Not relying on mains power or scheme water for fire fighting and defending homes
- Not relying on just one means of defence eg sprinklers

- Having appropriate protective clothing, including footwear with fire/heat resistant soles.
- Choosing a refuge in the house with at least 2 means of exit
- Sheltering in the house from the intense radiant heat until the initial fire front had passed
- After the fire front had passed and the house started to burn, moving to somewhere safer nearby, preferably pre-identified
- Time and effort management eg taking frequent turns to actively defend and then to control/look after children - that way those actively defending managed to get a break from the hard physical exertion involved, but were still doing something useful

What didn't work for many - and believed to have cost lives

- Placing themselves and others in "Harms Way" in spite of warnings in the days leading up to "Black Saturday"
- Having only one plan without backups/alternatives
- Being impaired physically and/or mentally from carrying out appropriate actions
- Evacuating by road late or in the wrong direction, rather than to a nearby "safer place"
- Poorly prepared houses and lack of defensible space
- Not having appropriate non flammable and full body covering clothing for protection against radiant heat and direct burns
- Inappropriate footwear - a number died where they fell after their footwear burnt or fell apart and they were no longer able to walk/move
- Poorly maintained and/or protected fire fighting equipment
- Pumps and generators failing, especially petrol powered due to superheated air and fuel vapourisation (not from lack of oxygen which is generally a myth)
- "Weak point" failures eg poly pipe and fittings, wiring from generators
- Insufficient independent water supply
- Choosing a poor location in the house to shelter and without alternate exits - bathrooms with no outside exit were involved in many deaths on the day
- Sheltering in basements or cellars either before or when the house started to burn
- Leaving it too late to get to a well designed and located bunker
- Using a poorly designed/located bunker
- Having children (particularly smaller ones) in the house meant at least one adult who could have been actively defending the house was required to control/look after the kids.
- Small children hiding and the search for them delaying evacuation from a burning house

You can make the most difference by being proactive well before the event!