

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT - Bulletin No 3

The Bushfire CRC was established under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme.

Our objectives can be summarised as providing research which enhances the management of the bushfire risk to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way.

## *The COAG natural disasters review: Delivering to bushfire risk communities - a Queensland perspective with application to other states. Alison Cottrell and David Lowe*

The review of natural disasters by the Council of Australian Governments resulted in the report *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements* which made a large number of recommendations affecting how the three levels of government deal with the major types of natural disasters and hazards.

The review revealed the following eight specific weaknesses (COAG 2004, p. 8-9) in the systems currently used to manage disasters: lack of natural disaster risk assessments and natural disaster data and analysis; focus on response and reaction; lack of post-disaster assessments to identify lessons learnt and opportunities for improvement; uneven recognition of the important role local governments have to play; lack of preparation for catastrophic disasters; limited availability of flood insurance; tendency to introduce ad hoc special relief schemes; and lack of coordinated national approach to disaster management.

The review concluded that current arrangements could be improved, and recommended a paradigm shift in focus from disaster response and reaction towards cost-effective, evidence-based mitigation and anticipation. The disaster mitigation package brings the total funding contributed by each level of government for disaster mitigation projects over the five years of the program to over \$100 million (Queensland Government 2003b).

Historically it is evident that successful implementation of programs could be jeopardized by high levels of complexity, long lead times, political elements, inertia, and accountability issues.

Other influences which have impacted upon outcomes include commercial needs, implementation gaps, legislative problems, policy and practice conflicts and media style and content. The implementation of the recommendations of the COAG report in Queensland, for example, will be overseen by the State Disaster Management Group.



The recommendations concerning bushfires include improvements to: mitigation strategies; policy and planning including land use; development and building controls; usage of consistent risk assessment methodologies; consistent data collection and research; public infrastructure; public education; warning systems; post-disaster assessments; support and restoration for social, economic, physical and emotional elements; legal protection, incentives, training and recognition for volunteers; and funding for

mitigation measures in remote Indigenous communities.

In order to commence the delivery of some of the benefits of the COAG natural disasters review of safer and more sustainable, resilient and self-sufficient communities the complex tasks associated with the COAG natural disasters recommendations relating to bushfires are required to be implemented into policy and planning areas and operationalised into practice at all state government and local government levels.

In the short term the burden of these types of additional responsibilities will fall mostly on state governments and local governments.

In the longer term the impacts may be felt much more by local governments and in particular those local governments less able to cope with such impacts because of size, population, revenue levels or other reasons. The fire service and other related service providers operating at the state and local level will also have impacts in their policy, planning and operations areas.