

Normal doesn't apply in a bushfire season

John Schauble



**NEVER BE
COMPLACENT**

NO matter how benign Victorian summers might seem, every one brings deadly potential. This summer, according to the experts, the state faces a "normal" bushfire season. But that immediately begs the question: what exactly does "normal" mean?

After three years of drought-breaking rains and milder temperatures, it is easy to forget where we were in February 2009. That summer became the fire season against which all future ones will be measured.

I admit to being wholly scared on Black Saturday. But my most frightening experiences in more than 25 years as a firefighter was during an average summer in 1997.

Summer in the Dandenong Ranges that year followed one of the wettest winters on record. More than 1400mm of rain (200mm above the average) fell in the preceding 12 months. Yet a dry January and a week of hot weather meant disaster for the communities across the hills.

The price of complacency that summer was panic and bewilderment. Residents living in an environment with a long history of bushfire made absurdly late dashes for safety. I can remember arguing with one woman who wanted to find her cat as the fire front appeared in her road.

Just minutes earlier, our CFA tanker had retreated from a street in Ferny Creek as flames consumed every house along its length.

In a single day, three people in my community died, more than 40 homes were destroyed and another 45 damaged. The main fire wasn't even very big — less than 150 hectares. By the end of that "normal summer", there had been many bushfires in the Dandenongs. It took years for the community to recover and some families never did.

There were other serious fires on the Mornington Peninsula, in Gippsland and at Creswick and Heathcote in central Victoria.

But living with fire does not mean living in fear. It does mean

understanding where you live and something about how, when and why bushfire is part of that.

Bushfires are not just about the bush, but about the suburbs and holiday towns, and travelling through regional Victoria. As we prepare for another normal bushfire season, part of me wants to say all will be well. Yet I am haunted by what I experienced in 1997.

We have only just started having the bushfire conversations in the hills, in conditions similar to those of 1996. There has been plenty of rain. The country is lush and green.

As the grasslands in the west of the state dry with each day, the real fire danger in the Dandenongs and many other forest areas is weeks away. That gives people in those places time to prepare; to plan what they will do if bushfire threatens and to work around their property to increase its chance of survival.

A lot of things have changed since Black Saturday. There is a greater emphasis on warnings, before bad fire danger days and as fires occur. The ways in which warnings are issued is multiplying, from phone and SMS, specific radio and TV broadcasts to warning sirens.

Yet in most respects, the key messages remain unchanged and are blisteringly obvious. The only guarantee of safety in a bushfire is not to be there when it happens.

If you don't leave early, defending a well-prepared house is a viable option in many cases for people who are physically and mentally capable and have a practised plan.

The worst choice is leaving late. That is when most people are killed by bushfire in Australia.

Dealing with bushfire is a shared responsibility and obligation between government, the fire agencies, communities and individuals. Don't just rely on someone else to bail you out.

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