

## August 2017: Brown Hill bushfire risk for residents living south of the freeway

Associate Professor Kevin Tolhurst AM — *Brown Hill fire risk assessment for residents south of the freeway. Video 2 in the series. Interviewer: Alice, a neighbourhood cluster contact for the Brown Hill Community FireAware Network.*

---

[Kevin Tolhurst]

**Brown Hill**, Nerrina, and Invermay are actually in the **potentially worst bushfire area in the Ballarat** area. That might seem unusual, because people tend to think that places like Mount Clear, Mount Helen, or the areas out to the west are most exposed to fire. And it's true that those areas will see fire — but a fire there won't be able to build to the same scale as a fire entering in to the Brown Hill, Nerrina, Invermay area will be capable of doing.

**Under Catastrophic or Extreme fire weather conditions**, a fire that starts up near Creswick or Clunes and comes down to the west of this area here has the potential to build to quite a scale. You end up with places like Nerrina, Brown Hill being hit by **large showers of embers**, which will start a large number of spot fires across the area.

So those **embers provide a massive threat** to this particular area. In that case you can have a lot of back yards potentially catching fire from spot fires, people's gardens would be burning — there won't be a wall of flames coming into the area, that is the main threat - **it is actually fires starting within the township.**

We saw that very much at the Wye River fire recently, down on the coast and the same thing happened in 2003 in Canberra, where the wall of flames basically stopped at the edge of the forest — but the fire continued into Canberra through the spotting process. **It was house-to-house ignition.** People's fences burning, their sheds burning, their gardens burning — **that was the main problem. And that's the sort of issue you would have here.**

In the Brown Hill area, you have a lot of **houses close together being one of the main risks is house-to-house ignition** — and that's something that's not usually considered a bushfire risk in a normal urban environment. When a house catches fire, the fire brigade is able to restrict the impact to that one house. But in a major bushfire event, there **aren't enough firefighters** and fire trucks to protect all the houses — so the chance of **house-to-house ignition is quite pronounced** in an area like this.

So, you really need to be **talking to your neighbours**, understanding what they're doing to protect themselves against fire. You need to be looking at what you're doing to protect your house from catching alight in the first place. **It really needs to be a neighbourhood effort trying to prepare your house.**

All of these things have to be **done well in advance** of the fire season. **You can't do it on the day a fire has started.** How you've planted your garden, how you prepare your house, what decisions you've made, what plans you've made for that day — that is what is really going defend you.

That's true in a big fire event. But we're **also subjected to more smaller fires under milder conditions on a more regular basis**. In places like Brown Hill, you can have a fire coming down Yarrowee Creek, for example, that can certainly impact on the back yards of a lot of houses. That is an **easier to deal with** level of bushfire risk, but **still potentially life-threatening with houses lost**.

What you need to do to **prepare** for that sort of fire is **consistent with what you need to do in a larger fire event**. Your plans in terms of whether you're going to stay and defend or leave early - that may change - **but you shouldn't be feeling "I'll just leave if it's a major event," because you could get caught** up in a fire that occurs quite quickly over a short period of time and won't have time to leave. So, you want to make sure you **have the best chance of defending your property** and protecting your own life and your family.

At the same time, all of that preparation is really **good preparation for a much more major event**, where you're going to need to be much more self-reliant.

I don't think a lot of people in the Nerrina and Brown Hill area would necessarily see themselves as being in a major bushfire risk area — because they have the highway nearby, or they're in relatively developed areas. But the fact that we have these forests between Creswick and Ballarat, and a bit of a mountain range there, actually means that it is where a major fire could impact the area. And under those really severe conditions, the **roads out of the area will be limited very quickly. So, the ability to leave the area will be limited** — and that means you really need to have a lot of preparations made well before any fire arrives.

*[End of transcript]*