

Shared Responsibility & Bushfire Management

Presenters:

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Acknowledgement of Country

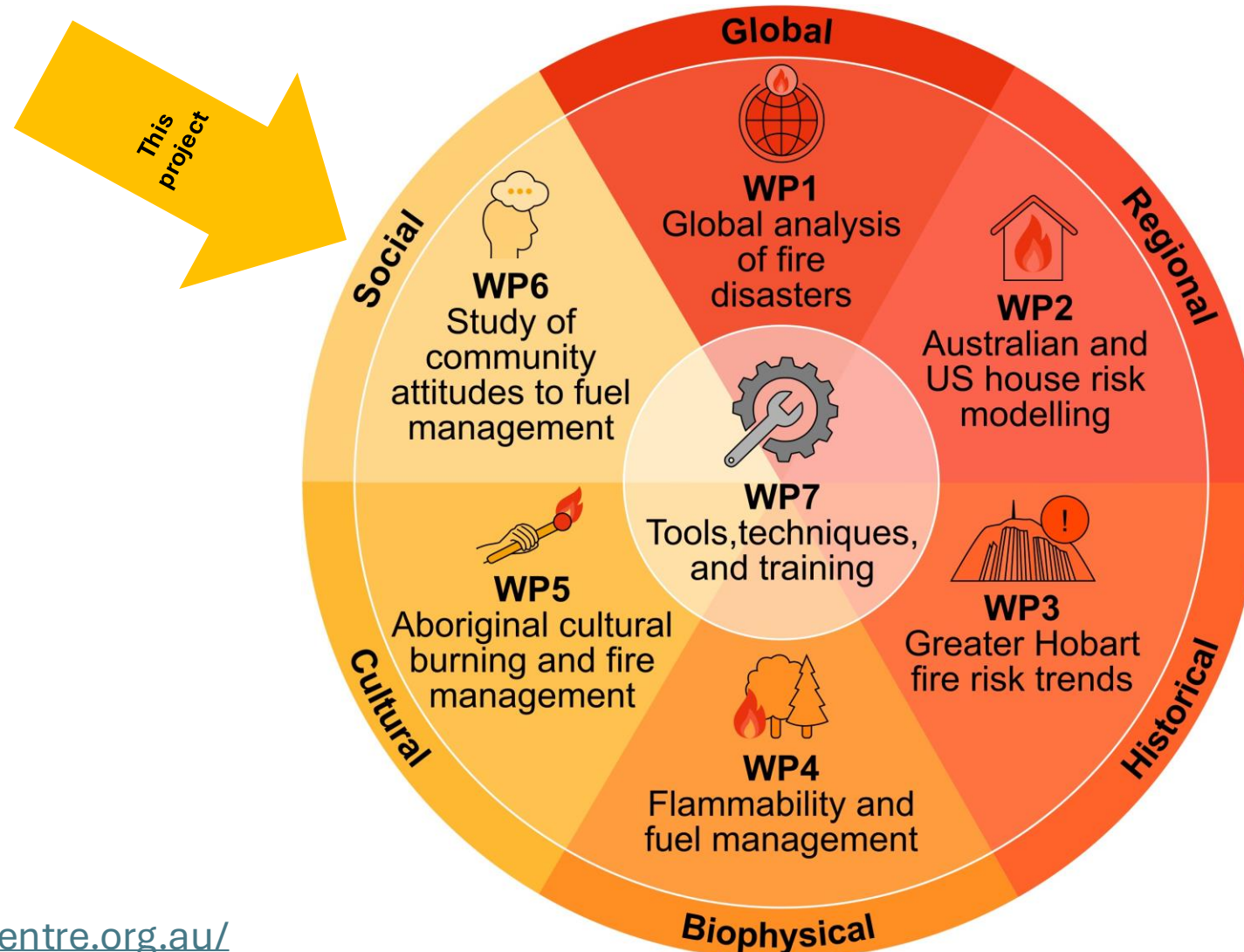
Manawaradhanjin – ‘in our hands’
(mana wara tha nyin)

Leanne Brook, 2022
@murramarang_art

**REFLECT
RECONCILIATION
ACTION PLAN**



Bushfire risk at the rural-urban interface project



<https://firecentre.org.au/>



Today's agenda:

1. Shared responsibility in context

- Global wildfire trends
- Wildfire mitigation research
- Governance framework

2. Our project: how is shared responsibility understood?

- Literature review
- Survey results

3. Next steps for shared responsibility



Part 1: Global wildfire context



<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-50951043>,
3 January 2020





Australia's fire context

- Since 1950s dangerous fire weather has increased and fire seasons are longer (Abram et al 2021)
- Since 1980s the mean number of years between fires has decreased, and burned area has increased – exponentially in autumn/winter (Canadell et al 2021)
- Since 2000 a substantial increase in the frequency of forest mega-fires (>1m ha) (Canadell et al 2021)
- Fire season is extending into spring and autumn, with reduced chances for hazard reduction, e.g. with prescribed fire (Clarke et al 2019)



Wildfire is a wicked problem...

“Wicked problems share characteristics. Each can be considered as simply a symptom of some higher order problem. . . . The definition is in the mind of the beholder.... Furthermore, there is no single correct formulation for a wicked problem, only more or less useful ones.”

Allen, G. M., & Gould Jr, E. M. (1986). Complexity, wickedness, and public forests. *Journal of forestry*, 84(4), 20-23.

...so, it should not be surprising that sharing responsibility for its mitigation and management is also challenging.

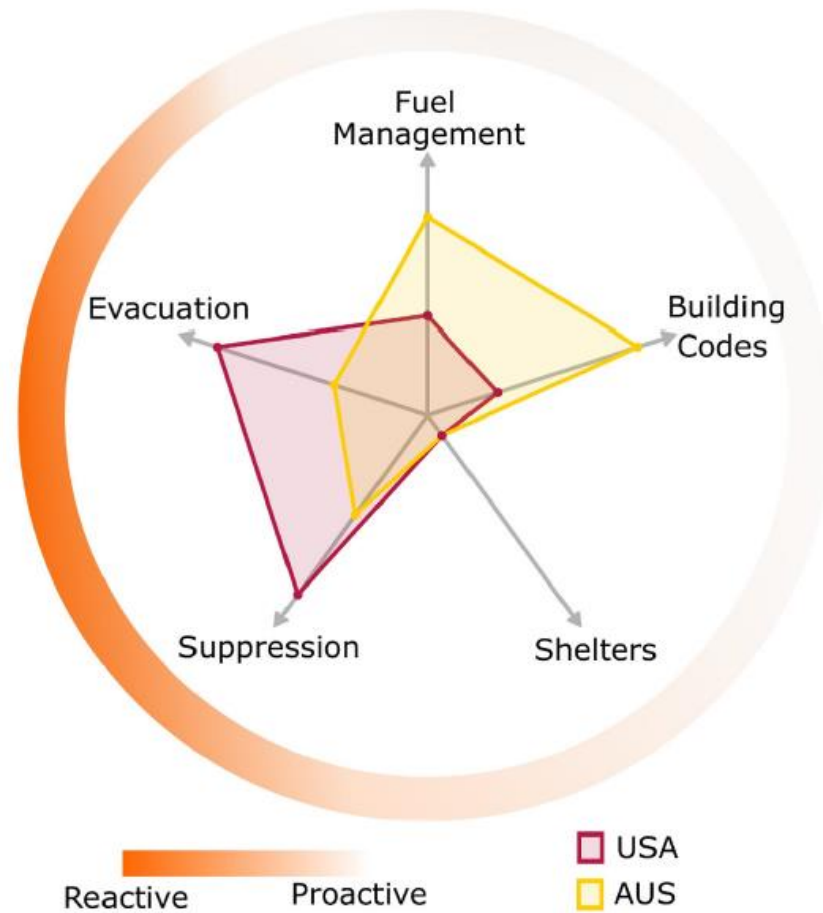


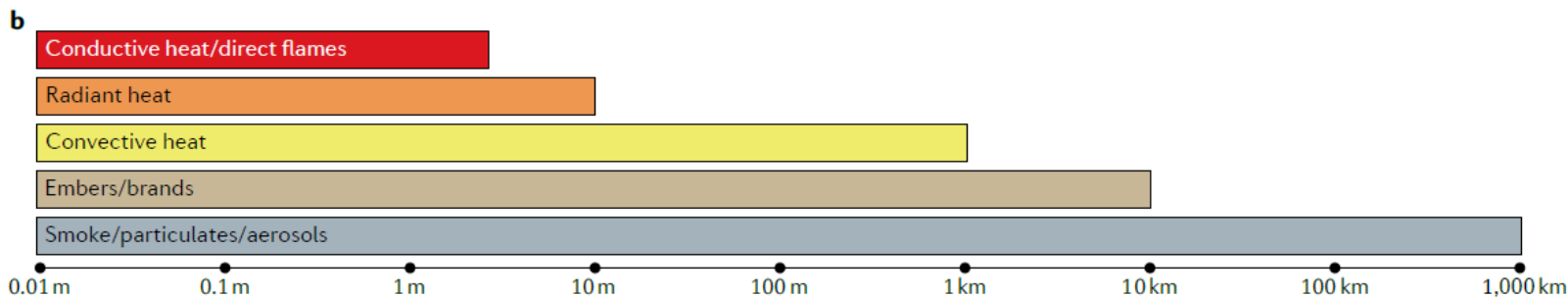
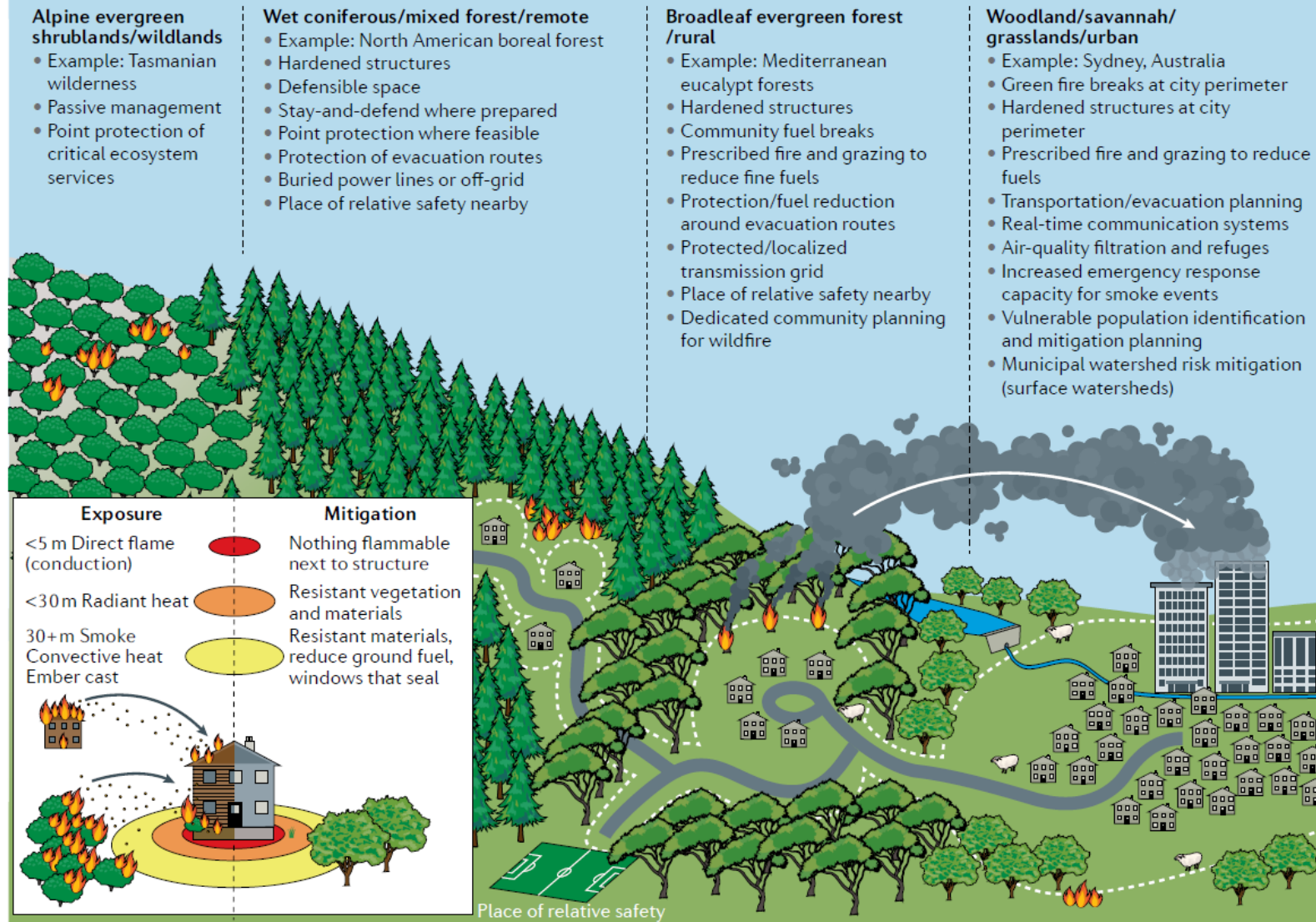
Shared responsibility for what?

Crucial context for 'sharing responsibility'



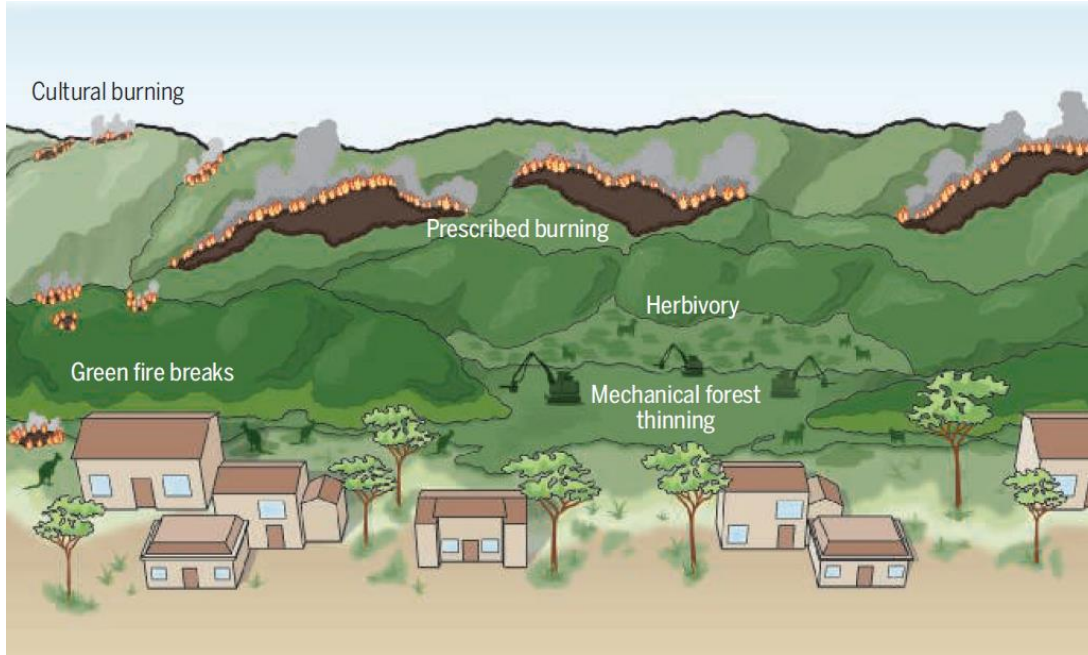
Wildfire management adaptation strategies



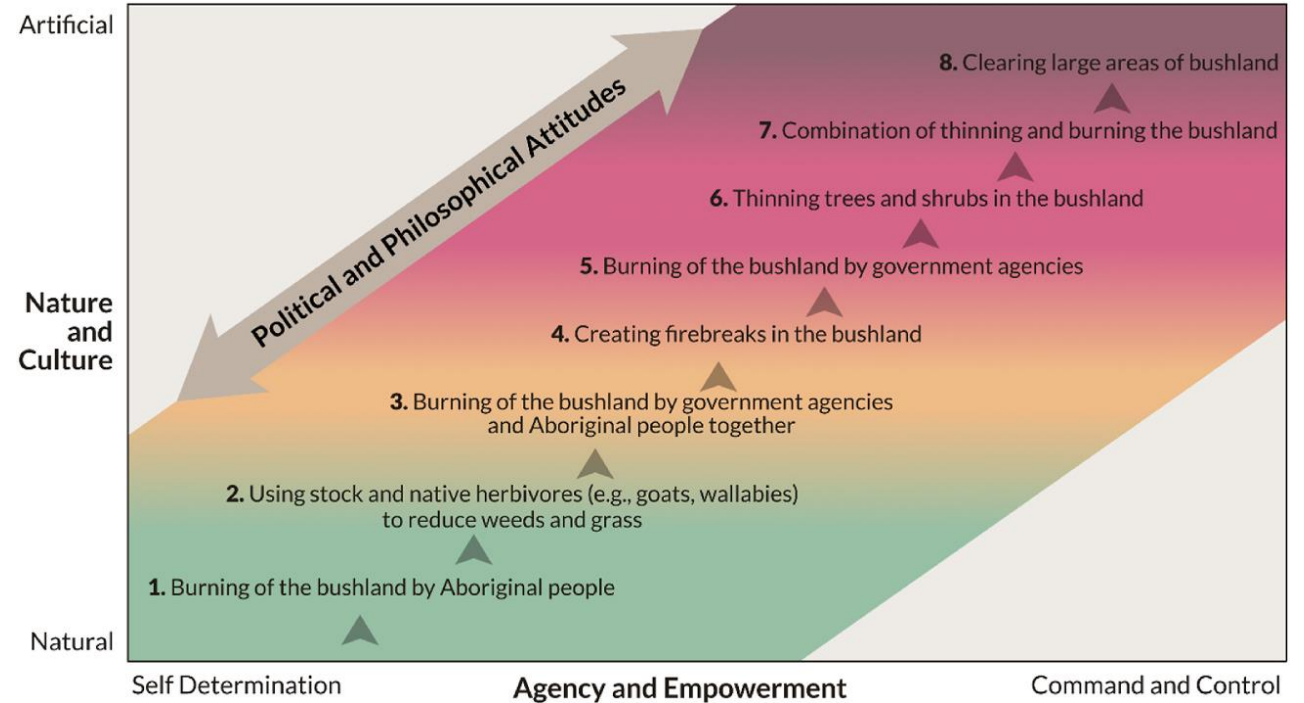


Bowman, D. M. J. S., Kolden C. A. et al. (2023). Vegetation fires in the Anthropocene. *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0085-3>

Landscape wide



Bowman, D. M. J. S. & Sharples J. J. (2023). Taming the flame, from local to global extreme wildfires. Australia rethinks strategies after 2019 to 2020 bushfires. *SCIENCE*



Seivwright, A., Onde, S., Gjedrem, A., Lester, L., & Bowman, D. M. (2025). Political orientation shapes attitudes to fuel management in the wildfire disaster prone island of Tasmania, Australia. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*



Sweden



Shared responsibility across scales

The governance context for shared responsibility



Global

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030

*"While States have the overall responsibility for reducing disaster risk, it is a **shared responsibility** between Governments and relevant stakeholders. In particular, non-State stakeholders play an important role as enablers in providing support to States, in accordance with national policies, laws and regulations, in the implementation of the present Framework at local, national, regional and global levels. Their commitment, goodwill, knowledge, experience and resources will be required."*

National

DIRECT

National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (NDRRF)
Second National Action Plan to implement the NDRRF
Australian Disaster Recovery Framework
National Adaptation Plan (2025)

INDIRECT

EPBC Act 1991 (Cth)
Social Security Act 1991 (Cth)

State/Local

DIRECT

Tasmania Emergency Management Arrangements (Issue 2) ('TEMA')

DIRECT

Emergency Management Act 2006 (Tas)
Fire Service Act 1979 (Tas)

INDIRECT

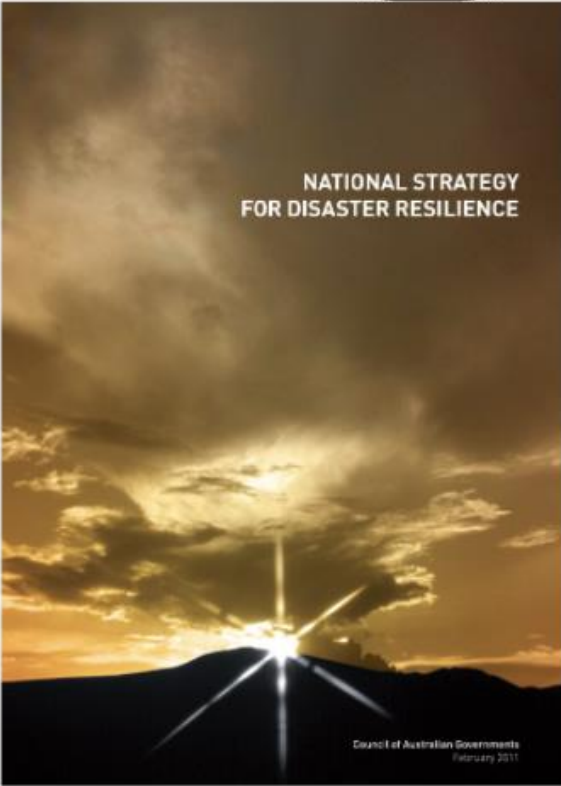
Native vegetation management, threatened species, land use planning, building laws

- McCormack et al, 'An anatomy of Australia's legal framework for bushfire' (2022) 46(1) *Melbourne University Law Review* 156
- McDonald and McCormack, 'Responsibility and risk-sharing in climate adaptation: A case study of bushfire risk in Australia' (2022) 12 *Climate Law* 128 [Note: Hamid-Walker, NHRA/QFD 2026]
- McCormack, Australian Research Council DECRA Fellowship, 'Evidence-based law reform for a fiery future' (2025-28)

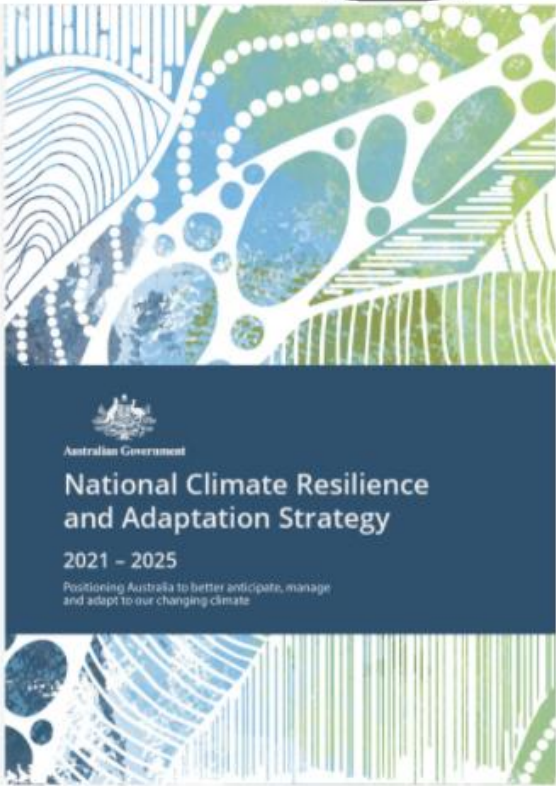


National context

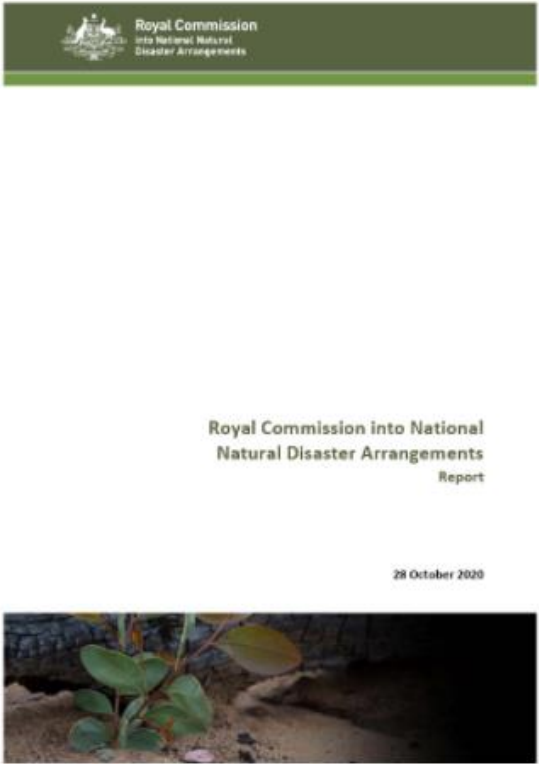
2011



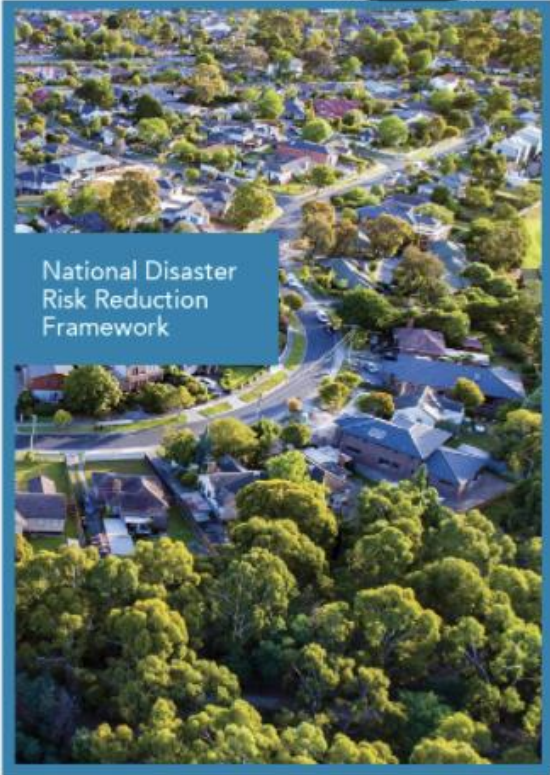
2021



2020



2018



High
community
responsibility



Low
community
responsibility



Part 2: Our project

Research questions:

- What do governments, NGOs, community organisations ('groups') think shared responsibility means?
- Do they perceive responsibility being shared? If so, how? If not, why?



Project method, participants

To answer the research questions, our project:

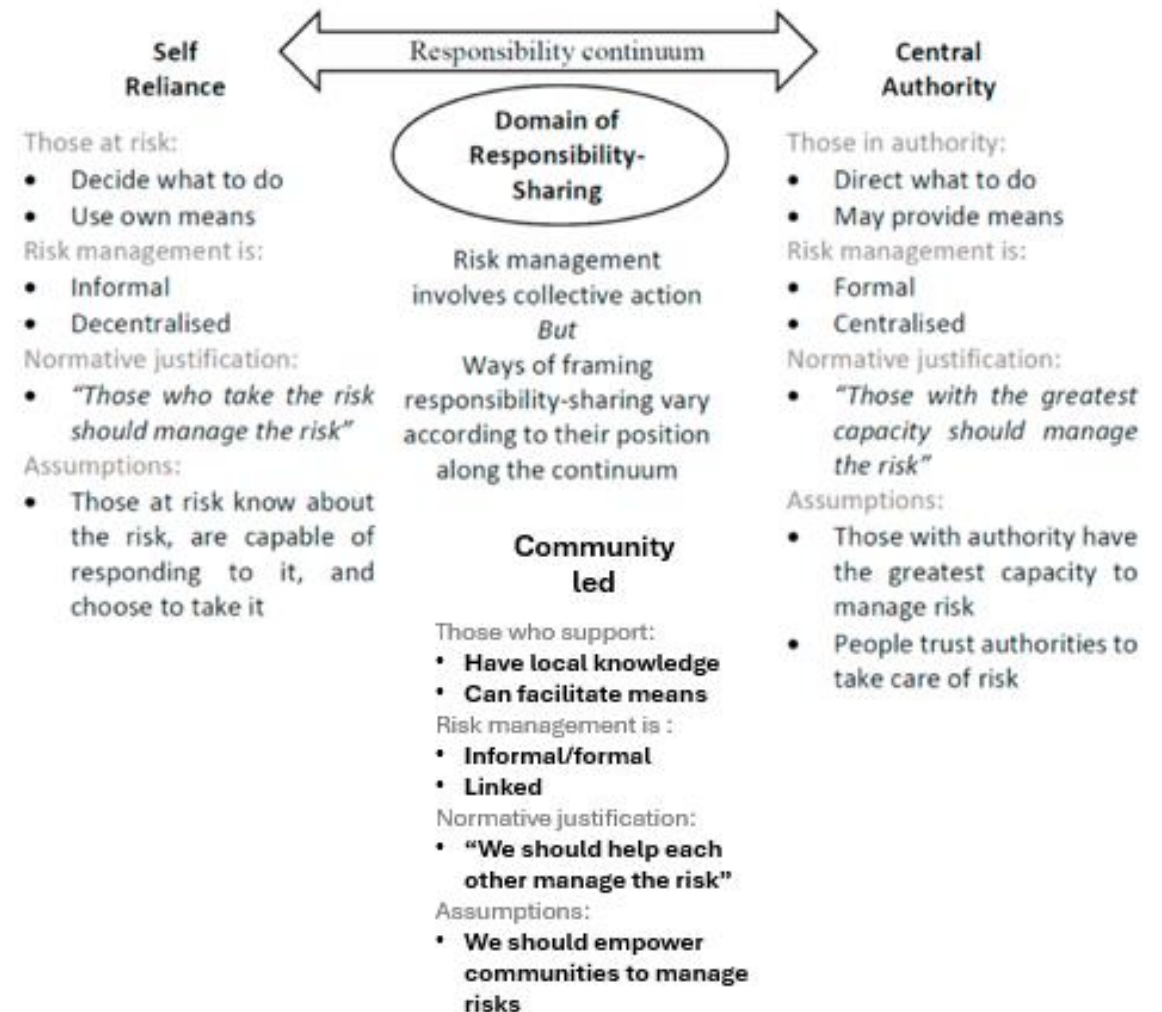
- Began with a comprehensive literature review
- Survey for diverse involvement, including ‘top-down’, bridging, grassroots, business groups (n=45)
- Interviews to develop deeper insights (n=19, ongoing)

Empirical components (survey, literature) were community grounded – focusing first on local, Tasmanian groups then extending the focus to gain insights from other states/scales



Literature review: shared responsibility for bushfire risk management

A literature survey of 27 research papers on ‘shared responsibility for bushfire disaster management in Australia’ highlights few academic papers investigate the notion of ‘shared responsibility’ through the lens of **grassroot organizations’** perspectives and actions.



The purpose of this study

- **Qualitative study:** Understanding the nuance of shared responsibility
- **Literature gap:** Learning more about community groups and bridging institutions' experiences and perspectives
- **Practical implications:** Informing and supporting community wildfire adaptation



Research participants

Societal levels (Dayl, et al., 2026)	This study's focus	Examples
Macro, governmental level - providing top-down guidance and support to communities	Top-down organisations and institutions	Fire and emergency agencies; Local councils; government departments
Meso, organisations that support community groups, householders and land-owners	Bridging institutions	Humanitarian groups; Wildfire and emergency NGOs; Research knowledge and outreach
Meso, community-based level – representing the localised groups formed to prepare and address bushfires	Community groups	Local community groups (suburb based); Landcare groups; Traditional owners and continuing custodians of Palawa country.
Meso, for profit organisations – groups that operate in fire hazardous landscapes or that provide services or tools towards bushfire management	Businesses or companies (small sample size)	Forestry industry; Land-owners; and infrastructure support
Micro, household/individual level – reflecting the issues and challenges faced by individuals and their families	Indirectly represented	Residents represented through their engagement in various groups and organisations

Adapted from: Daly, M., Boehme, T., Turner, N., Aitken, J., Green, A., McKinnon, S., Eriksen, C. & Cooper, P. (2026). Strengthening community disaster resilience in uncertain times: a multi-level analysis of an Australian bushfire. *International journal of disaster risk reduction*, 106000.



Bridging and community groups

→ Bridging

- Connects
- Supports
- Generally, focuses on issue more than on place

→ Community groups

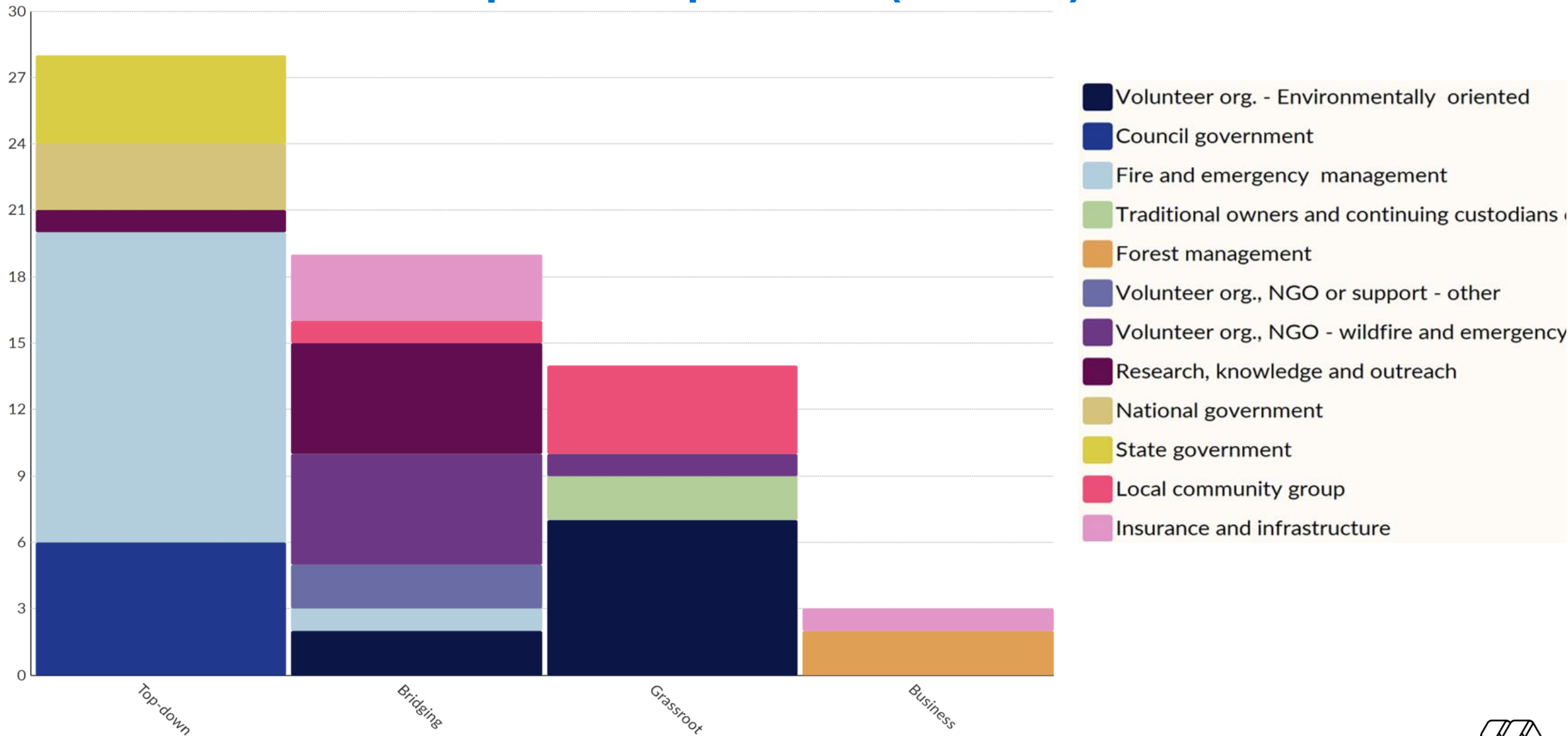
- Work locally
- Environmentally / socially oriented
- Volunteer based



Top-down initiatives



Research participants (n=64)





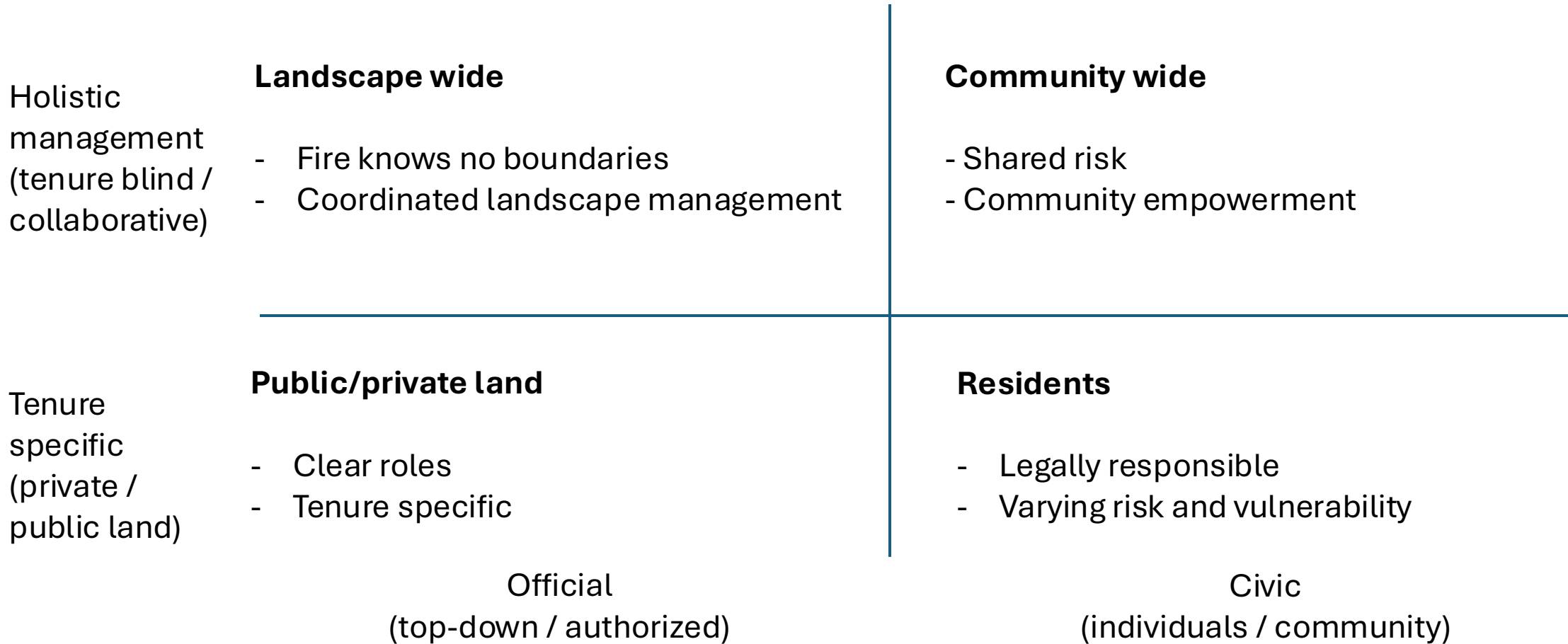
What do the participants talk about
when they talk about
shared responsibility for
bushfire management?

NSW, Australia
@Jon Werner Nilsen



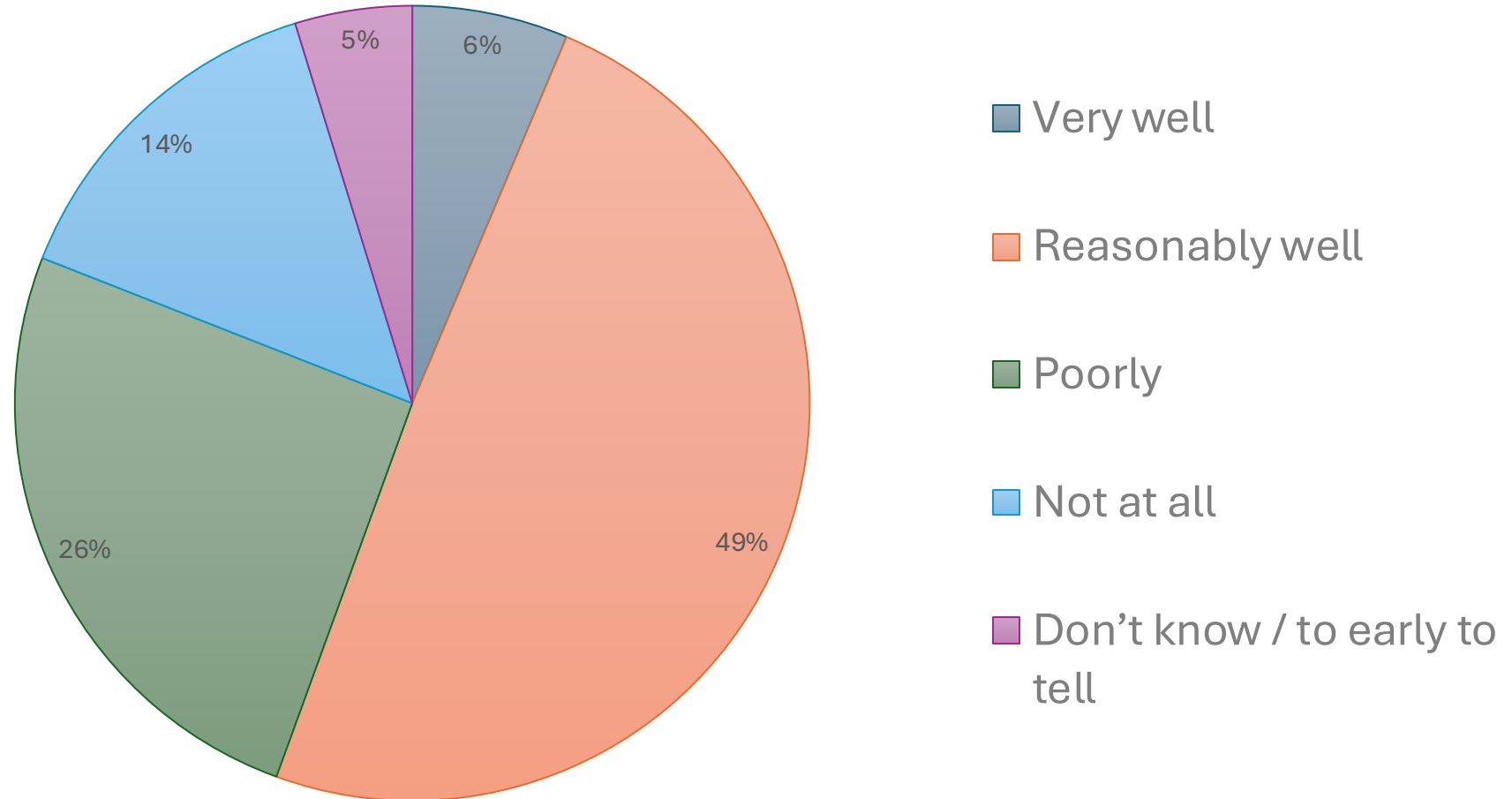
Finding #1

Responsibility is shared across wildfire prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery



Finding #2

Over 50 per cent think shared responsibility works well in practice.



Major themes

Perspectives on shared responsibility vary

- Top-down (government authorities)
- Bottom-linked (bridging institutions)
- Bottom-up (local communities)

Paradox

- Different operational understandings and experiences



Finding #4

Shares responsibility for bushfire risk management – Most important aspect in an ideal world



Community empowerment

“[...Empowerment] means actually having some **genuine participation in the decision making**. Because otherwise, to not have that, we are disempowered. And we aren't able to protect ourselves or our environment if there are these decisions made, and we don't get to participate in them.”

(Community group, Grassroot)





Cases



Opinion OURS & YOURS

Public has skin in the game, let's use it wisely

Bureaucratic indifference to bushfire management continues to recklessly put lives on the line

The Dolphin Sands bushfire tore through my property during Thursday, December 4. I successfully defended my home with the help of two friends and my firefighting equipment. I was well prepared but also fortunate in many ways. Paradoxically, one piece of luck was that no authorities seemed to know I was there, so I wasn't advised to leave.

A basic element of bushfire planning is deciding if you will stay and defend or leave. Most people choose to leave. However, those of us who are well-prepared may choose to stay and defend our homes. This relates to the broader concept in disaster management of shared responsibility.

What might shared responsibility for a bushfire look like in Dolphin Sands?

Shared responsibility looks like the community and local association shouldering our share of preparation, while feeling frustrated at other agencies, such as council and the Parks and Wildlife Service, failing to manage their land. Then when a fire occurs, the situation is reversed - various authorities assume control, with community members treated paternalistically. While we appreciate that all parties are acting under their own merits in difficult and rapidly changing circumstances, it seems sensible to implement lessons from previous disasters.

Shared responsibility is a legacy of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal

Dr Robyn Moore



Commission and a central pillar of COAG's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. Ideally, this policy enables communities, individuals, tiers of government, and other stakeholders to work seamlessly together. Unfortunately, that's often not how it works out in practice. Rather, paternalism leads to communities like ours being informed instead of working in partnership with other stakeholders.

The Dolphin Sands Community Association more than fulfils its responsibilities in terms of bushfire preparation. However, our exclusion from stakeholder meetings means we are relatively powerless to influence decision-making. Our concerns can be politely ignored by authorities, compromising our ability to protect ourselves, our properties, and our

environment.

The DSCA is proactive in terms of bushfire preparation. However, we often come up against apparent indifference from relevant authorities. We struggle to understand this indifference. Dolphin Sands is a bushfire hot spot. No one can claim that the most recent bushfire was unexpected.

For example, there is a coastal reserve, about 30m wide and 15km long, between properties on the south side of Dolphin Sands Rd and Nine Mile Beach. Authority for this reserve lies with PWS Property Services division. Prior to the most recent bushfire, most of the reserve was covered in dense coastal wattle. It is illegal for community members to clear vegetation in the reserve, except to create a 700mm track to the beach.

In the past, the DSCA contacted the PWS about the danger of the coastal wattle (also called boobialla or kerosene bush by some people) in the reserve. We explained that it could potentially act as a wick during a fire and suggested fire breaks were



The remains of a property which was destroyed by bushfire in Dolphin Sands, in December 2025; and a table, inset right, which details how public participation could work in terms of bushfire responsibility. Pictures: DPfEM and Supplied

created. We offered to muck any cleared vegetation using a contractor we were hiring with grant money. The only response was a bureaucratic brush-off.

"We are not intending to clear any coastal wattle on Crown Land in the Dolphin Sands/ Bagot Point areas but thanks for your offer," was the reply.

As predicted, during the most recent Dolphin Sands bushfire, the coastal wattle acted as a wick to spread the fire eastwards, along the south side of the peninsula. Then when the wind shifted almost 180 degrees to blow from the south, this wall of fire was pushed from Great Oyster Bay to Moulting Lagoon.

While this is only one factor that impacted the latest bushfire, it is a significant one. The quote below is from a community member who lost their home on the night of December 4:

"Our house was situated close to the beach and looking in a westerly direction from our house for several kilometres there were no dwellings, only an unbroken sea of coastal wattle. This fuel load was the primary reason the fire could not be controlled."

This property owner had created a defensible zone around their house. However, they were forbidden from dealing with the coastal wattle in the



IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and is found in public participation plans around the world.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOALS	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMOTES TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and information in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations with those developed by the decision-maker.	We will implement what you decide.

reserve.

Tragically, our experience of being fobbed off by authorities echoes the stories recorded by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. It seems that nothing has been learnt.

Shared responsibility must go beyond individual community members preparing their properties for bushfire. Our lives are on the line - we literally have skin in the game. And we have a lot to offer. Bureaucratic indifference must end. We are calling for:

• The right to defend properly prepared homes. While volunteer firefighting crews do a great job, there

aren't enough volunteers to protect every property. People who are willing and able to defend their properties should be allowed to access them.

• Glamorgan Spring Bay Council to implement recommendations of the Dolphin Sands Bushfire Mitigation Assessment Report November 2024, especially fire breaks (recommendations 1 & 2) and road verge maintenance (recommendation 6).

• Year-round fire ban in Dolphin Sands.

• Free green waste disposal for Dolphin Sands residents.

• Genuine collaboration with relevant authorities and agencies before, during and after bushfire events. We have valuable contributions to make based on our understanding of the issues and challenges with bushfire management in Dolphin Sands.

• Parks and Wildlife Service to manage coastal reserves to minimise the spread of bushfire.

• Feasibility study into an escape route to Swanwick, such as a barge or pedestrian bridge.

Dr Robyn Moore is secretary of the Dolphin Sands Community Association



Part 3: Next steps

What will we do with what we have learned?



Next steps

- Research pathway
 - Report for NHRA
 - Ongoing qualitative analysis (documents, interviews, workshop)
- Impact pathway
 - regulatory reform (e.g., draft fire legislation; authority for grassroots organisations? New funding mechanisms?)
 - shared vision projects, working with communities, grassroots groups (e.g., building on 'sparking conversations' project)



Thank you 😊

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Conversation points:

1. **What groups** did you see take up shared responsibility, and did a **really good job** with it?
2. What have you observed as **barriers and challenges** for **community groups** taking up responsibility for bushfire mitigation?

