

# Findings from the Survey of Experiences and Observations During and After Lancefield-Cobaw Fires

March 2016

## Background

The Lancefield-Cobaw Croziers Track planned burn was conducted by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in the Macedon Ranges Shire in spring 2015. The 266ha burn was located approximately 10km west north west of the town of Lancefield.

The burn was ignited on 30 September 2015. The planned burn breached containment lines on 3 October 2015 and was brought under control overnight with approximately 70 additional hectares burnt. Further breaches of containment lines occurred on 6 October 2015. When the fire was finally contained on 13 October, it had burnt over 3,000ha and destroyed several dwellings, numerous sheds and many kilometres of fencing. It had also negatively impacted upon lifestyles, livestock and livelihoods and caused considerable economic and social upheaval in the surrounding communities.

Emergency services, local authorities and community organisations provided considerable resources to assist in the response to, and recovery from, this incident.

## About the survey

The survey was designed by the Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Subcommittee of the Macedon Ranges Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee. The purpose of the survey was to examine people's experiences and observations during and after the Lancefield-Cobaw fires through a gender lens – to identify the potentially different ways men or women might be impacted.

The survey was conducted in March 2016, four and a half months after the fires were contained. The hyperlink to the online survey and a PDF of the survey were distributed electronically by subcommittee members through their networks.

Of the 79 responses received, 73 were completed online and 6 were hard copies.

The survey had 21 questions. All questions were optional; while 79 people completed the survey, not everyone answered every question. The answer rate dropped as the survey progressed: from 100% at question 1 to 78% by question 12.

## Findings

The majority of respondents were from the CFA or Macedon Ranges Shire Council (38% each), which aligns to the most common roles of those who responded to the survey -firefighter and in recovery.

*“More men in operational and decision making roles, women in admin roles.”*

The gender split was relatively even – 51% males and 49% females, although it is not known how this compares to the overall gender split of those involved in response to, and recovery from, the incident.<sup>1</sup>

*“In my experience all volunteers are given an equal attempt at every task unless they choose not to undertake it.”*

Just over half the respondents considered there were equal opportunities for women and men deployed to the fire incident or recovery, or to develop new skills, with tasks being allocated equally between men and women.

With regards to caring for children and/or elderly parents, the majority of respondents didn't know if there were flexible working arrangements for both women and men; or if it was easier for men or women to make alternative arrangements for their family responsibilities.

*“Firefighting is a physically demanding job. There will be members from both sexes that may have some difficulty undertaking some tasks.”*

When considering the duties performed during the response and in recovery, just over half thought tasks were allocated equally between men and women with no gender bias, although it was noted that men held more senior roles across the organisations involved and more frontline operational roles.

The majority of respondents considered the equipment available to be equally suitable for men and women. However one respondent noted that SES overalls are not designed for women.

*“A female SES volunteer mentioned the SES overalls were made so men could urinate without having to remove the overalls and they aren't modified for female use. She had bought herself a “she-wee” which she was trialling...”*

At debriefings, the majority thought both women and men were present and that women contributed as much as men. During the fire response and in recovery, just over half the respondents thought men gave equal weight to information provided by, or views of, women and men. However one respondent commented that a male crew member ignored specific instructions from a female crew leader, putting the whole team at risk

The majority of respondents thought no one used inappropriate language towards or around members of the opposite sex, although it was noted that some men toned down their language when a woman was present. The majority also thought no one exhibited inappropriate behaviour towards or around members of the opposite sex.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey provided a tick box option using the binary concept of gender: male/female. Two respondents commented on the survey's use of this traditional concept:

*“Whilst I appreciate the attempt to do something good with the survey, using binary concepts of gender is considered offensive.”*

*“Hate the re use of the word gender - gender was more about masculinity and femineity not male and female.”*

*“I experienced home based gender bias. After working long days I still had to complete majority of parenting/home duties.”*

The majority of respondents did not experience or observe any other different treatment, opportunities or barriers due to gender. However, those who did either experienced home-based gender bias; a lack of gender-specific facilities; or the lack of gender appropriate overalls.

Just under half the respondents described their understanding of the term ‘gender equity’ in the context of disaster. Of these, more than half described *gender equity* as having an element of equality or sameness between the genders either in treatment or treatment and value. More than a third described *gender equity* as a situation where gender is not considered.

*“As both a volunteer fire-fighter and a staff member I have rarely experienced gender inequity. It has always been the best person for the job.”*

## Conclusion

This is the first survey of this kind run by the Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Subcommittee. A couple of key observations made by the Subcommittee include:

- While the overall response rate was good, the declining response rate as people progressed through the survey suggests they either lost interest or didn’t understand the questions or their purpose. Several respondents stated they felt the survey was a waste of time and irrelevant.
- The delayed timing may have resulted in many recording ‘don’t know’ in response to questions as they couldn’t remember or weren’t aware of other people’s experiences. However, the high number of ‘don’t knows’ recorded may support the notion of a lack of awareness within the broader community of gender equality and its link to family violence particularly in the context of disaster response and recovery.
- Any future surveys of this type should start with some simple definitions, including the difference between the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’; and more clearly define the survey’s purpose. The subcommittee may also consider supplementing a survey with some interviews to explore some aspects further.

## Enquiries

For more information about this survey or the work of the PVAW in Emergencies Subcommittee please contact Jill Karena - [jkarena@mrsc.vic.gov.au](mailto:jkarena@mrsc.vic.gov.au) or 5422 0249.

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