

Understanding alternative approaches to mass evacuation when a wildfire approaches



“People and Their Environments”

A research work unit of the U. S. Forest Service Northern Research Station

1033 University Place, Suite 360
Evanston, IL
60201-3172

847-866-9311

For more information, contact
Sarah McCaffrey
(x 20)



Research Partners: Sarah McCaffrey, USDA Forest Service, Evanston, IL
Alan Rhodes, Country Fire Authority, Victoria, Australia

Different countries have different approaches to what threatened communities should do when a wildfire approaches. For instance, in the United States the emphasis is on mass evacuation, whereas Australia encourages homeowners who are well prepared to stay and actively defend their properties. For a number of reasons, recent years have seen a growing interest in the United States in exploring evacuation alternatives: local officials are becoming increasingly concerned that mass evacuation may not always be the safest response, many homeowners are indicating they do not plan to evacuate, and the rising costs of wildland firefighting have contributed to increased recognition of the need to re-examine the components of the traditional wildfire management approach.

This study seeks to identify key themes of interest by examining recent initiatives in three US communities that are considering alternative approaches to evacuation such as Shelter in Place and Australia’s Leave Early or Stay and Defend position. Examining initiatives in several communities will allow us to compare how different communities are attempting to deal with the wildfire risk. The study aims to understand what local communities are attempting to achieve with their alternative approach and what they are doing to implement it. The study will also look at how the initiative reflects the local context and explore differences in perceptions between important groups, such as residents, land managers, business and community leaders, and environmental advocates.

Project objectives: This study will seek to answer the following questions:

- What are the alternative approaches to evacuation being considered in specific communities?
- What factors led to consideration of the alternative?
- What are the perceived benefits of the new approach?
- What factors are seen to facilitate or hinder adoption of alternatives to evacuation?
- What different perspectives exist on the alternative approach?
- What actions have been taken to implement the new approach and how have they worked?

Given the particular interest in the Australian strategy the study will also explore ways in which the US context may or may not be compatible with the Australian approach. Lessons learned from the study will inform future research and provide initial guidance for other communities and agencies considering issues about how communities can respond to the threat of wildfire.