What firefighters say about climate change

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You do not find many climate change sceptics on the end of [fire] hoses anymore… They are dealing with increasing numbers of fires, increasing rainfall events, increasing storm events. – A senior Victorian fire officer, interviewed in 2012 for a recent National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility report.

There have been fierce arguments this week about whether it’s opportunistic to discuss climate change in connection...
to the devastating New South Wales fires. Amid all the bluster, it’s surprising that we’ve heard so little from one group of experts: frontline emergency service workers, including the firefighters risking their lives for the rest of us.

Yet if you do ask for their opinion - as we did for a study released in June this year - many, like the senior fire officer quoted above, are not reluctant to talk about climate change. In fact, quite a few of the emergency workers and planners we interviewed said we should be talking about it more, if our communities are to be better prepared for disasters like the one unfolding in NSW right now.

**Prepare for the worst, hope for the best**

In 2012-13, I led a joint research team from Griffith and RMIT to prepare a report for the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) on disaster risk management and climate change.

To do so, we compared the emergency responses to Victoria’s 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, the 2011 Perth hills bushfires, and the 2011 Brisbane floods.

We started by comparing the official inquiry reports into these events to the relevant research on disaster risk management. This was followed up by interviews with 22 experts from Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane, including nine fire officers, five emergency services workers, and eight assorted planners or policy officers. The proposals that emerged were then reviewed at a set of workshops.

One of the most interesting things we found in talking to the emergency service workers was an overwhelming acceptance and concern that climate change was already affecting Australia, based on their personal experiences with disasters.

As a Western Australian fire officer told our research team, we need to “get the scientists, who have a lot to share about climate change and climate change adaptation, talking to the operational people” - a suggestion backed by many of our interviewees.

**Preventing future emergencies**

Our report was not the first time that firefighters and other emergency workers have spoken out about climate change.

For instance, earlier this year it was reported that the United
Firefighters Union released research by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research that found almost 2 million Australians were relying largely on volunteer fire brigades to protect them and A$500 billion in assets.

The same article referred to research from the Centre for Australian Weather and Climate Research, a collaboration between the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology, on how the fire season across much of south-eastern Australia appeared to be going on for longer.

In November 2009, 25 firefighters, paramedics, police, military and emergency services workers spent nearly a month running 6000 kilometres from Cooktown in Queensland to Adelaide and back to Melbourne, speaking to communities along the way about their concerns about climate change. Many of them had worked in the Black Saturday firestorm, in which 173 people died, as well as the record-breaking heatwave beforehand that health experts estimated killed more than twice as many people as the fires.

In the same year, the United Firefighters Union’s national secretary wrote to then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd:

On behalf of more than 13,000 firefighters and support staff in Australia, I write this open letter to request a review of Australia’s fire risk… As we battle blazes here in Victoria, firefighters are busy rescuing people from floods in Queensland. Without a massive turnaround in policies, aside from the tragic loss of life and property, we will be asking firefighters to put themselves at an unacceptable risk.
Firefighters know that it is better to prevent an emergency than to have to rescue people from it, and we urge state and federal governments to follow scientific advice and keep firefighters and the community safe by halving the country’s greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

Lessons to be learnt

So what can we learn from listening to firefighters and other emergency services workers about how to be better prepared for future disasters?

Our study’s main aim was to come up with a set of practical changes based on those expert views on how to better integrate climate change adaptation into disaster management programs.

One suggestion was to set up a permanent fund, based on the success of Landcare. Anyone from government or the community might form a group and bid for money to tackle a particular issue, such as replanting local wetlands to reduce the impacts of flooding.

Another proposal was to set aside some local government funding to set up community resilience grants. Residents would be able to apply to their local council to fund projects, such as creating a network of people ready to assist elderly neighbours in times of bushfires or floods. Locals could even vote in town hall meetings on which proposals their council should fund.

Whatever we do, if we want to handle disasters better in the future, our frontline emergency workers have plenty of ideas to offer - if we’re ready to listen to what they say.