Bushfire myth busters

Recent major bushfires provide evidence that discounts many popular myths and misconceptions about bushfire safety.

Theme		Myths and misconceptions
Learning about bushfires	1	*Discarded bottles and broken glass can start bushfires.*
		While it is possible to carefully adjust a lens to focus the sun's rays and start a fire, the chances of sunlight through an abandoned piece of glass starting a fire is extremely remote. If this were a likely source of ignition, we would have many more fires each day given the amount of broken glass around the countryside.
	2	*Fires travel along the ground and can be stopped by roads, rivers or creeks, swimming pools and brick walls.*
		Evidence from previous major fires suggests people misunderstood how fires are spread by burning embers, usually travelling rapidly many kilometres ahead of the fire front, and crossing natural barriers such as roads and creeks very readily.
	3	*The front of the fire is the area which is burning. You are safe until this reaches you.*
		Spot fires are ignited by burning embers carried many kilometres ahead of the front of the fire. In major fires, houses caught fire from embers well ahead of the fire front or caught fire from burning embers well after the fire front had passed.
	4	*A cool change will always reduce bushfire danger.*
		The typical Victorian summer cool change with a change in wind direction can greatly increase the size and intensity of a bushfire. Cooler weather does not immediately reduce the bushfire danger in itself, unless it is accompanied by rain and increased humidity.
Preparing for bushfires	1	*I'll be fine: I'm blocks away from the bush.*
		An ember attack in a bushfire can be intense, even many kilometres from a bushfire area.

	2	*Brick houses are always safe and don't burn, wooden houses are not safe and will always burn.*
		While the external cladding of a home is one factor in determining fire resistance, a range of other design and construction features – as well as the amount of preparation that has gone into creating a defensible zone around the house – will be significant in determining bushfire risk. Brick houses may have wooden eaves, window frames, roof frames, doors, decks and other combustible elements.
	3	*I keep my grounds tidy, the lawns mown and the gutters clean – I'll be all right.*
		While this will contribute to creating a defensible zone around a house, without carrying out all of the recommended preparatory work and actively defending the home during an ember attack, tidy lawns and clean gutters will often be insufficient to prevent bushfire attack.
	4	*The best plan in a bushfire is to stay and defend the house until it looks too bad, like when the flames are at the house. You should then go somewhere else to shelter.*
		Tragically, many of those who have lost their lives in recent fires left the decision to evacuate far too late, sometimes abandoning a home which afforded significant protection from radiant heat to be caught in the open or in a car as the fire front passed.
Responding to bushfires	1	*When a bushfire comes, you get out of the house quickly and meet at the letterbox.*
		This response to fire taught to primary school students is appropriate when the fire is inside a house. Evidence suggests that young students do not readily differentiate between fires which occur inside the house and those which occur outside the house; therefore, they see this as the correct response. In a bushfire, the house often provides the best available protection from radiant heat.
	2	*Heat is dangerous so it is important to keep cool when a fire is in the area. Wear light, loose-fitting clothes and thongs to stay comfortable.*
		News footage of bushfires sometimes shows people defending their homes when inappropriately dressed for the task. Thongs and light clothing afford little protection from the radiant heat or flame that could

		be encountered when moving about, defending a home.
	3	*If we can make sure the flames don't come near us, we will be safe.*
		Protection from radiant heat is the most important priority, and radiant heat can be very significant at some distance from the flames of a major bushfire.
	4	*The emergency services will tell me when it's time to leave.*
		A major bushfire emergency is a rapidly evolving event in which communications methods are likely to be compromised, local conditions are likely to change rapidly and emergency services personnel are likely to be stretched to the limit. Reliance on others, however experienced they are, to know your individual circumstance and to make a decision for you regarding evacuation is very unwise.
	5	*I should fill a bath with water and sit in it when the fire approaches.*
		Filling the bath provides a ready source of water to apply to spot fires that might occur around or within the house, but sitting in the bath and not actively defending the home is not recommended. Some individuals who may have taken shelter in the bathroom during a major fire would have been safer moving around the house, actively defending it and ensuring they had several potential escape routes from the building if it were to catch fire.