



Improving South Australian bushfire warning systems

SNAPSHOT

In a bushfire emergency clear information and advice for those likely to be affected is essential and can save lives and property. Learning from the outcomes of previous bushfires, along with community feedback, the SA Country Fire Service (CFS) implemented a series of enhancements to its warning system.

Background

Following the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires, a national framework for scaled advice and warnings to the community (*Prepare Act Survive*) was introduced.

Implemented by the Bureau of Meteorology and the CFS, the bushfire warning system includes fire danger forecasts and ratings, total fire bans and trigger points for messaging when a fire starts.

The initiative

After a number of bushfires in South Australia in 2014 and 2015, the CFS sought to develop an evidence base to

improve the effectiveness of the warning system.

After each fire, independent expert researchers used online surveys and interviews with people directly affected by the fires to gather information and feedback about fire responses.

Problems identified included road names and locations used for radio and website public messages being insufficient for people to understand where the fire was.

This information enabled CFS to make a series of changes to the warning system so that people had the information they needed to take action to protect themselves and others.



EVALUATING FOR PUBLIC VALUE

Public value

Positive social impact:

Since 2009 emergency management policies have recognised that providing information to those at risk during a bushfire is as important as fighting the fire. Effective information builds the capacity of the community to prepare, act and survive during an event. Clear, consistent and accurate information enables people directly affected to make informed choices in an emergency and be less reliant on emergency services. It also assists concerned families, travellers and tourists to know how they may be affected.

Public engagement:

There is a strong incentive for ‘users’ of bushfire warning systems to provide input and advice based on their own experience which may have been forged in dangerous and traumatic circumstances. It is important that changes to warning systems are supported and valued by the community, particularly those directly affected.

Legitimacy & support

Clear objectives:

The reforms support the ‘Safe communities, healthy neighbourhoods’ state strategic priority and the CFS priority to be a ‘source of credible and timely information’.

Political support:

Key Ministers responsible for emergency services supported and led proposals to improve the warning system.

Stakeholder & community support:

Support and confirmation came from community members and partner agencies. Partner agencies such as SAPOL, SES, MFS, local government and DCSI were actively engaged and provided strong support for proposed changes. Extensive engagement occurred with individual community members who had previously been affected by bushfires. Engagement with community groups, schools and businesses also occurred to learn from their experiences and help shape best practices.



What outcome will be delivered?



Whose support is necessary?



How will the outcomes be delivered and who will be responsible?

Operational capability

ICT and other resources: Online resources were modified to enable spatial information mapping when issuing warnings.

Human resources: CFS staff led development of system enhancements and managed contracts with independent researchers.

Financial: The cost of research and system development was built into overall emergency management review processes.

Outcome

By adopting an evidence-based, continuous improvement approach, lessons from bushfire events have been learnt and acted upon.

Changes to messaging include showing the fire–scar area and potential impact

areas on maps on the CFS website. Warnings on all CFS social media feeds have been automated.

Enhancements were also made to CFS disaster resilience programs to ensure communities were engaged and informed of ways to support their own household preparedness.

As a result of feedback from people affected by the Pinery fire, changes to bushfire messages included prioritising the content of the warnings (key messages to top), simplifying the language and providing a map to supplement wording about the location and direction of the fire. Nationally, a new fire danger rating system is being developed to advise the public of bushfire danger levels. For the 2017-18 fire danger season, fire danger ratings will be published four days ahead of time.

For more information:

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**Photograph courtesy Ashley Hosking*