

FIRE UPDATE

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FINDING THE KEY TO BETTER TEAMWORK

RESEARCHERS ARE WORKING WITH AGENCIES ON COLLABORATION WITHIN INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEMS

This project is exploring information flow and collaborative work practices across the Incident Command System (ICS), particularly in multi-agency operations.

There are high expectations that the outcomes from this research will make a major contribution to work practices across the ICS.

The researchers are working closely with stakeholder agencies to:

- identify aspects of teamwork and collaboration that are important within incident management teams (IMTs) and emergency coordination centres (ECCs);
- map actual work practices and the influences of organisational structures and cultures on information flow and organisational learning; and,
- identify improvements that agencies may implement.

OUTCOMES

The project started in February 2006 and the research activity underway includes:

- undertaken a comprehensive review of the IMT-related literature in fire and emergency management settings;
- compiled a summary of reports from

bushfire incident inquiries where multi-agency interoperability was involved (both the review and the report will inform future phases of the study and will soon be available at www.bushfirecrc.com;

- conducted interviews with 44 senior personnel with extensive IMT experience across five agencies in Victoria and Tasmania; and,
- commenced observations of both simulated and live incidents, including the alpine fires in Victoria last month. During the observations, the researchers have been collecting data with video and audio equipment and through pre and post incident questionnaires.

EMERGING ISSUES FROM THE RESEARCH

During the interviews participants were asked about:

- Their perceptions of good or poor ICS/IMT experience;
- Their perceptions of good/poor information flow;
- Practices known to support effective teamwork in their agency;
- Formal and informal learning initiatives; and,
- Factors that may improve ICS/IMT effectiveness.

Data was also coded to identify: interagency factors that affect collaborative ICS/IMT work; indicators of organisational culture; and

ways of organising the temporal, spatial and technological aspects of ICS/IMT work practice.

Findings will soon be available as a report, but at this stage it is noteworthy that the following observations were made among the IMT participants:

- There was considerable support for the overall structure and applicability of the ICS/IMT approach;
- There was genuine acknowledgement that cooperation between agencies is improving and that the training provided is generally helpful;
- There were a range of interoperability issues identified. These included issues relating to technological compatibility, nomenclature and training; and,
- There was overall support for the kind of training on offer in that it prepared people to better understand the content of the tasks and roles they needed to perform. However, participants also thought training did not go far enough in terms of providing for the skills and practices needed to create the synergies that can reasonably be expected within high-performance teams.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Project D5, Optimising information flow through collaborative work performance: Enhancing emergency incident management team effectiveness and organisational learning, is led by Dr Christine Owen from the University of Tasmania, with Ian Dwyer (Bushfire CRC PhD Researcher), Greg Hickey (Bushfire CRC PhD Researcher) and Jan Douglas (Research Assistant)



▲ ABOVE: RESEARCHERS OBSERVED AN INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM IN A SIMULATION AT THE DIAMOND CREEK OFFICE OF THE COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY IN VICTORIA IN NOVEMBER.

◀ LEFT: THE RESEARCHERS ARE RECORDING TEAMS IN ACTION WITH VIDEO AND AUDIO EQUIPMENT, BOTH IN SIMULATIONS AND IN REAL BUSHFIRE EVENTS.