

# FIRE UPDATE

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## COORDINATION OF MULTI-AGENCY EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT TO REDUCE COMMUNITY CONSEQUENCES

**This research project aims to reduce the consequences of emergency events to communities by investigating multi-agency information flows in emergency management coordination.**

It has two phases: an evidence collection phase and a policy implications phase. During the evidence collection phase key exemplars where multi-agency emergency management coordination has been complex and/or problematic will be analysed to identify lessons that can be learned. A workshop will be held with emergency management partner organisations to discuss better ways of supporting communities through improved inter-agency networking and coordination.

The research is sponsored by Victoria's Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Human Services. The project aims to inform a wide emergency management audience because of its applicability to a range of emergency events.

### CONTEXT

To provide timely advice and responsiveness to communities, effective emergency management must be structured in ways that allow emergency management partners to effectively share what they know, coordinate their activities/responses, and adjust to the conditions in a way that is both dynamic and suitably responsive.

The challenge is to better understand how multi-agency emergency management coordination can be improved to reduce the consequences to communities of the emergency event.

### BACKGROUND

The DSE has previously initiated the development of partnerships with related emergency services organisations and the community through a range of policy developments and projects. There is a



▲ The manner in which inter-agency incident control works directly impacts upon communities affected by the emergency event.

### THE AUTHOR

The author is Dr Christine Owen of the University of Tasmania.

need to advance on this previous work and create mechanisms for developing resilient partnerships through consultation and workshops to further understand multi-agency emergency information needs and to identify areas for further improvement in order to reduce the consequences to communities of emergency events.

The objectives of the Multi Agency Information Flows Project are to:

- Establish a clear understanding of critical information needs of partners and stakeholders required to reduce the consequences of emergencies on communities.
- Identify and map the inter-relationships

that support the dissemination of critical information.

- Investigate factors which enable or constrain information flow to and from incidents, through to command structures and to partners and stakeholders at relevant levels.
- Facilitate a workshop to assist Emergency Management partners and stakeholders to identify strategies for improving emergency management information flows.

The research comprises the following methods:

- A literature review is being conducted to identify what is known that enables or constrains effective multi-agency coordination.
- A conceptual framework is being developed for use in the analysis of multi-agency emergency exemplars.



▲ Multi-agency coordination of emergencies involves complex information flows.

- Four Victorian exemplars have been identified where multi-agency coordination was complex and possibly problematic. These include:
  1. The Westpoint Chemical Fire, 2007
  2. The Windstorm 2008
  3. The emergency events of 2009 including:
    - a) The Heatwave, January – February 2009
    - b) The Black Saturday fire fight, and
    - c) The 2009 season fires through to recovery
  4. The Hailstorm, 2010
- Analysis of the exemplars is involving both secondary sources of existing reviews and inquiries (for example, taken from the Office of Emergency Services Commissioner website) as well as primary sources (for example, interviews of key stakeholders who were involved)
- An interview survey has been developed to consult with personnel involved in the exemplars.
- From the data collected above, formal and informal information flows and breakdowns will be mapped and points of potential intervention identified.
- The maps produced from this analysis will then be used in a workshop with critical stakeholders to discuss information flow processes to support

multi-agency coordination and to identify any areas for improvement.

- A report will be prepared based on the analysis and the outcomes of the workshop for emergency management stakeholder consideration.

## RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The outcomes and expected benefits are:

- Improved inter-agency networking and coordination
- Improved information flow from response agencies to emergency management partner organisations
- More seamless transition between planning, response and recovery phases of an emergency event
- Better emergency services provision supporting communities.

## DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES

Emergency management partner organisations are those agencies with key roles to play, either in providing support to the control agencies or in the provision of services to communities for which those emergency partner agencies are responsible. Boundaries are called into play when, for example, an emergency event crosses multiple boundaries. Boundaries are also more than administrative ones. They can be technological, functional, geographical, cultural and political.

## END USER STATEMENT

“Reducing the impact of emergencies on communities is strongly dependent on people and agencies undertaking the right actions at the right time. These actions often need to be undertaken cooperatively and nearly always need to be supported by information on current and emerging risks and needs. This project will help us to better understand the challenges to effective information flow so that we can strengthen multi-agency coordination to support communities in emergency events.”

**Craig Lapsley**

**Director, Emergency Management  
Department of Human Services  
Victoria**

“Understanding the critical information needed for agencies and communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies is essential for effective emergency management. This project aims to build on our fundamental knowledge of information flow, understandings and relationships needed to underpin effective multi-agency coordination to reduce consequences of emergency events for communities.”

**Liam Fogarty**

**Assistant Chief Officer  
Fire Planning and Knowledge, Land  
and Fire Division  
Department of Sustainability &  
Environment, Victoria**

## HOW THE RESEARCH CAN BE USED

These results show how the activity of emergency incident management transforms into different sets of demands depending on the location of work teams within the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System structure and the demands of the incident. Areas for potential improvement can also be considered in terms of the degree of change needed to address the issue identified.

The research aims to provide guidance about areas that could be targeted to achieve improvements in multi-agency incident management coordination.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Emergency Management Agencies in Australia and New Zealand will be approached to support the project by providing access to personnel who can share insights about multi-agency coordination in the events identified.