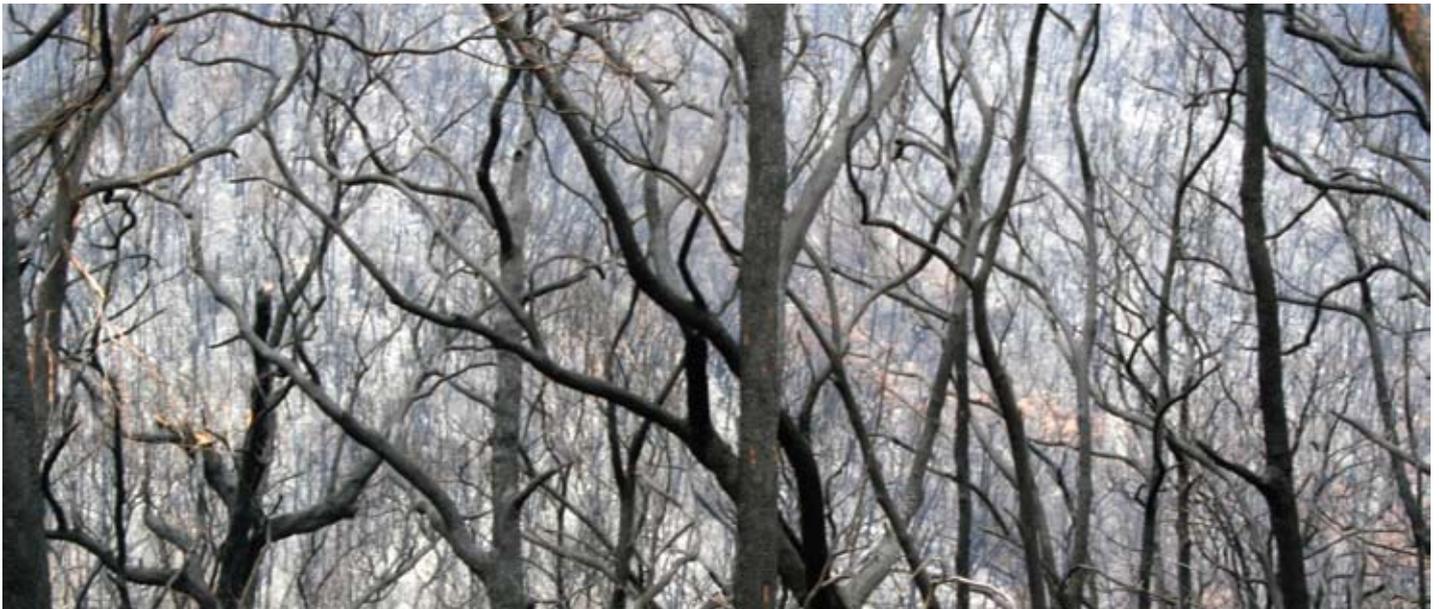


FIRE UPDATE

ISSUE 33 AUGUST 2009

ROYAL COMMISSION - INTERIM REPORT



INTRODUCTION

On 17 August the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission handed down its interim report to the Victorian Government. While there were a range of recommendations made concerning the operation of Victorian agencies there were also key recommendations that will have implications for all fire, land and emergency management agencies around Australia.

Significant changes were recommended to the delivery and wording of advice and warnings given to the community. This included community education material that highlighted:

- Leaving as the safest option
- Not all homes are defensible
- If a home cannot be defended you should leave
- The risk of defending includes death
- There could be psychological impacts in staying to defend a property.

The Commission also recommended a range of measures the Victorian Country

ABOUT THIS ROYAL COMMISSION

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was established to examine issues arising from the bushfires that began on 7 February.

These fires were preceded by a decade of severe drought and several weeks of heatwave conditions. The main fires were in a large area north-east of Melbourne, and in Gippsland and on the outskirts of Bendigo and Horsham - 173 people died, thousands of properties were destroyed.

The interim report of the Commission focuses on matters that could be considered before the start of the 2009-10 bushfire season.

Fire Authority should take to be able to provide assessments of the defensibility of individual houses to their owners.

Changes to the fire danger rating system were also recommended to include ratings beyond the current upper limit of extreme and to develop a severity scale for use in bushfire warnings.

The Interim Report makes 51 recommendations and is the culmination of six months' work, including four weeks of community consultations; examination of more than 1260 submissions and 35 days of public hearings involving a total of 87 witnesses.

The Commission resumed public hearings on 24 August, with an initial focus on building standards in bushfire-prone areas. It will then investigate the major fires and examine the circumstances surrounding all fatalities. Public hearings are expected to continue through to early 2010.

The final, more comprehensive, report is due by 31 July 2010.

[See also Fire Update - Issue 31]

It recommended fire danger indices should be published by the Bureau of Meteorology.

During fires the Commission has recommended warnings be founded on the principle of maximising the potential to save human lives. This includes improved information on the severity,

location, predicted direction and likely time of impact of bushfires on specific communities and locations. The warnings should use the principles set out in the Commonwealth policy paper *'Emergency warnings - Choosing your words'* (2008). A two tier system of Bushfire Information and Bushfire Warnings is recommended with a Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) used before all community warnings.

The Commission has also indicated that Incident Controllers should be able to give advice to people to relocate as part of official warnings.

The use of community refugees has also been recommended as has Victorian agencies prioritising resources to assist in the defence of designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places at times when they are likely to be in use.

Many of the recommendations have matched the proposals announced in July by the Victorian Premier, John Brumby, and work is already underway to implement a many of these recommendations. The Victorian Government will provide a formal response to the Commission by the end of August.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The full Interim Report and an Executive Summary can be viewed via the link on the Bushfire CRC website.

WARNINGS

RECOMMENDATION 4.1

The State ensure that bushfire warnings issued in Victoria:

- are founded on the principle of maximising the potential to save human lives;
- embody the principles encapsulated in Recommendation 8.5 of the Council of Australian Governments report, the *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* (2004);
- embody the principles endorsed in the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council Draft Discussion Paper, *A National Systems Approach to Community Warning* (May 2009); and
- incorporate the use of the Common



Alerting Protocol, as adapted for the Australian context.

RECOMMENDATION 4.2

The State ensure that the content of bushfire warnings issued in Victoria reflects the principles set out in the Commonwealth policy paper *Emergency Warnings – Choosing Your Words* (2008). In particular, all bushfire warnings issued in Victoria must use clear language, avoid euphemisms, and contain explicit information in relation to:

- the severity, location, predicted direction and likely time of impact of bushfires on specific communities and locations; and
- the predicted severity of impact of the bushfire and whether a specific fire poses a threat to human life.

RECOMMENDATION 4.3

The State commission research into the development of a new fire severity scale that denotes the risk posed by dangerous and extremely dangerous bushfires (similar to the cyclone categories 1 to 5).

RECOMMENDATION 4.4

The State ensure bushfire warnings in Victoria are confined to two categories or stages:

- Bushfire Information - a message providing information to the community on a bushfire that is 'going' and has the potential to threaten public safety; and
- Bushfire Warning - a warning to the community about any dangerous

or extremely dangerous bushfire, particularly one that is burning out of control and poses a threat to human life.

RECOMMENDATION 4.5

The State ensure that the Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) be used in Victoria to precede each bushfire warning or group of warnings for bushfires that are dangerous or extremely dangerous, particularly for a fire that is burning out of control and poses a threat to human life, subject to appropriate limits on the maximum frequency of use.

RECOMMENDATION 4.6

The State invite commercial operators to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), similar to its MOU with the ABC, on the dissemination of bushfire warning messages and the use of the Standard Emergency Warning Signal by those operators.

RECOMMENDATION 4.7

The Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner and the CFA develop guidelines for the use of sirens in communities that decide to use a siren as part of their response to bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 4.8

The Australian Government, Council of Australian Governments and the State determine whether it is technically possible to implement the second phase of the national telephony-based warning system (that is, the delivery of warning messages to mobile phones based on the physical location of a handset at the time of the emergency) with a view to implementation for the 2009-10 bushfire season.

INFORMATION

RECOMMENDATION 5.1

The Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council and the Bureau of Meteorology collaborate with researchers to explore options for the fire danger indices and fire danger ratings including:

- an additional fire danger rating beyond 'Extreme';
- adjusting the existing fire danger ratings to correspond to higher Fire Danger Index values; and
- developing a revised fire severity scale

for use in bushfire warnings based on new fire danger ratings.

RECOMMENDATION 5.2

The Bureau of Meteorology include the Forest Fire Danger Index and the Grass Fire Danger Index in its fire weather warnings and general weather forecasts on its website and in material distributed to the media.

RECOMMENDATION 5.3

The State ensure that a single, multi-agency portal for bushfire information be established that uploads information simultaneously to both CFA and DSE websites.

RECOMMENDATION 5.4

The State ensure that the single multi-agency portal for bushfire information be designed to allow Incident Control Centres to directly post information and warnings.

RELOCATION

RECOMMENDATION 6.1

The State amend the *State Emergency Response Plan* so that the word relocation is used in preference to the word evacuation (except in cases where evacuation is clearly more appropriate).

RECOMMENDATION 6.2

The CFA amend its policy *Advice to the Community Before and During Wildfire* to enable trained CFA personnel to recommend to particular households, communities or locations that they plan to leave early, based on an assessment of defendability, the vulnerabilities of the people there, and the degree of ease with which people are able to leave the area in relative safety.

RECOMMENDATION 6.3

The CFA and DSE amend operational policies to require the Incident Controller to assess whether relocation should occur and to recommend relocation when warranted.

RECOMMENDATION 6.4

Municipal councils review their Municipal Emergency Management Plans to ensure there is appropriate provision for relocation during bushfires, in particular, to indicate the location and arrangements associated with designated emergency relief centres.

STAY OR GO

RECOMMENDATION 7.1

The CFA revise the publications and programs by which it communicates with the community about preparing for bushfires and what to do in the event of a bushfire to:

- reinforce existing advice that community members should prepare, and decide, well before a fire occurs, whether to leave early or stay and defend their homes; and
- clearly convey the following principles:
 - the safest option is always to leave early rather than to stay and defend,
 - not all homes are defendable in all circumstances and householders are advised to undertake an individual assessment of defendability,



- unless a property is defendable the advice is to leave early,
- the impact of topography, fire weather and fire intensity on defendability should be factored into household assessments,
- the risks of staying to defend include the risk of physical injury and death,
- contingencies are needed as the best-made plans may fail,
- even if a plan is to stay, preparations to enable leaving should also be made, including the preparation of a 'relocation' kit specifying the location of designated community fire refuges,
- there could be psychological impacts of staying to defend a property,

- it is inadvisable for children to be present during the defence of properties,
- practical steps are needed to protect the vulnerable. Families with young children, older people, and disabled people are advised to plan for early relocation,
- advice on triggers for when to leave to incorporate the need for flexibility, the dangers of leaving late and the undertaking that a warning may not be received, and
- advice in relation to the policy specifically targeted to urban communities on the urban/rural interface.

RECOMMENDATION 7.2

The CFA consider the means of providing individual advice to residents in bushfire prone areas, as to the defendability of their homes.

RECOMMENDATION 7.3

The CFA ensure its members are fully trained as to the changes to the advice to the community set out in Recommendation 7.1.

RECOMMENDATION 7.4

The CFA train facilitators and educators and ensure manuals, brochures and other materials are enhanced to incorporate changes to the advice to the community in relation to the 'stay or go' policy and the changes recommended elsewhere in this report.

RECOMMENDATION 7.5

The State and its agencies implement an advertising and awareness campaign on the changes to policy and practices as set out in this report, such as the Standard Emergency Warning Signal, telephony-based warning system, use of sirens by local communities, refuges and relocation.

RISK AND REFUGE

RECOMMENDATION 8.2

The Municipal Association of Victoria report to the Commission on the progress of amendments to Municipal Emergency Management Plans by those municipal councils trialling the Victorian Fire Risk Register.

RECOMMENDATION 8.3

The CFA give priority where possible to provide resources to assist in the defence of designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places at times when they are likely to be in use.

RECOMMENDATION 8.5

The State promulgate criteria for the identification and operation of neighbourhood safer places, and involve councils and local communities in their development and implementation as appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 8.7

Municipal councils record the location of designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places in Municipal Fire Prevention Plans and Municipal Emergency Management Plans, and inform residents and visitors about their use and location.

RECOMMENDATION 8.8

The State to have developed uniform signs for designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 8.9

The CFA maintain an up to date, state-wide list showing the precise location of all designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places, and provide the list to DSE, Victoria Police, the State Emergency Service, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, and the Victorian Bushfire Information Line.

RECOMMENDATION 8.13

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development review the adequacy of bushfire fire protection measures in children's services facilities including kindergartens, child care centres, preschools and early learning centres.

INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

RECOMMENDATION 9.1

The State ensure that State Duty Officers of the CFA and DSE be given direct responsibility for ensuring pre-designated level 3 Incident Control Centres within their respective control are properly staffed and equipped to enable immediate operation in the case of a fire on high fire risk days.

RECOMMENDATION 9.2

The CFA and DSE agree procedures to

ensure the most experienced, qualified and competent person is appointed as Incident Controller for each fire, irrespective of the point of ignition of the fire.

RECOMMENDATION 9.3

The CFA and DSE ensure that where a level 3 Incident Controller or officer of equivalent ranking is satisfied that a bushfire warning is required, then such Incident Controller is authorised to release a warning where the designated Incident Controller is temporarily unavailable.



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

RECOMMENDATION 10.1

The State amend the *State Emergency Response Plan*:

- so the control agency for a fire is responsible for issuing and communicating warnings; and
- to remove from emergency response coordinators the responsibility of ensuring the control agency gives consideration to alerting the public to dangers and potential dangers arising from an emergency.

RECOMMENDATION 10.5

Victoria Police, in consultation with CFA and DSE, review the guidelines for the operation of roadblocks during bushfires, including how to:

- formulate the terms of a discretion to police on roadblocks to allow entry to:
- residents returning to their homes;
- people delivering relief and aid to residents and to animals;
- essential services crews; and
- expedite the exercise of the discretion

in favour of persons able to establish their bona fides.

COMMONWEALTH RESPONSE

RECOMMENDATION 11.1

The Commonwealth facilitate discussions between relevant Commonwealth agencies (including Emergency Management Australia, Defence, Defence Imagery Geospatial Organisation and Geoscience Australia) and state and territory fire services to identify ways in which Commonwealth resources might be applied more rapidly and effectively during extremely dangerous bushfires, including investigating the potential for these resources to be used for detecting, tracking and suppressing bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 11.2

The Commonwealth, through Emergency Management Australia, provide briefings at least once a year to state and territory agencies regarding arrangements available (including through Defence) to support jurisdictions during disasters and emergencies, including bushfires. State and territory representatives should advise relevant Ministers and the Chief Officers of emergency services (including fire services) of the outcomes of these briefings.

EMERGENCY CALLS

RECOMMENDATION 12.1

The Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner formally advise the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority and Telstra Triple Zero of forecast severe fire risk days and particularly days where there is a risk of extremely dangerous bushfires.

RECOMMENDATION 12.2

The State ensure the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA) is funded to provide greater surge capacity during extreme events, including establishing additional work stations for fire calls at ESTA centres.

RECOMMENDATION 12.3

The State further promote, through the Council of Australian Governments, more effective emergency call service arrangements throughout Australia.