

# The role of multiple agency approaches to emergency management in enabling and constraining efficacious outcomes

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## Interoperability in Australian bushfire response

**Background:** In recent times it has become increasingly important that agencies involved in responding to bushfires are able to integrate their operational systems and resources, both technological and human.

The scale of resources available to respond to bushfires increases from one fire season to the next. However, so does the complexity of the incident. For those resources to be deployed effectively it is necessary for a wide variety of agencies and organisations to come together to achieve a high level of interoperability.



Protecting a railway line in 1939\*



Protecting a railway line in 2006

**Interoperability:** The term interoperability refers to the ability for relatively heterogeneous, independent and autonomous systems to operationally interact and integrate with each other. Interoperability has implications for both inter and intra agency vertically and horizontally integrated systems.

**Aim:** The aim of this PhD is to discover and explore the issues of interoperability associated with bushfire response in Australia, with a particular focus on multiple agency coordination centres, such as the ECC, IFAC and IMT in Victoria and their equivalents in the other states and territories. By exploring the historical trajectories of the agencies, within the context of their role in bushfire management and mitigation, and gaining a greater understanding of the past and present we can better anticipate, plan and prepare for the future.

**Preliminary findings:** Interviews with IMT personnel has found that there are a number of issues which hinder interoperability between agencies. They are:

- The inhibiting of information flow
- A variety of technological and information systems
- A variety of agency specific nomenclatures
- Different systems, processes, procedures and organisational structures
- A variety of training approaches and methods
- Different resource bases
- Unfamiliarity with environment and personnel

The photographs below show the diversity of the agencies involved in the coordinated response to the 2006-2007 Gippsland bushfires.



Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC)



Integrated Fire Agency Coordination Centre (IFACC)



Incident Management Team (IMT)



Fire Ground

**AIIMS ICS:** The Australasian Integrated Incident Management Systems (AIIMS) is a generic approach to organising during emergency incidents. As AIIMS is being adopted by all agencies that respond to emergencies in Australia they are able to integrate their personnel and operational processes in various levels of coordination.

**Method and Sample:** This research project is employing a variety of methods for collecting data.

- A desk audit of relevant historical government legislative and agency organisational documentation
- Interviews with personnel involved in emergency incident management
- Observations (training and real-time) involving Audio/Visual recording



\* Photo is sourced from the Department of Primary Industry web site: [www.nre.vic.gov.au.../39/fire19m.htm](http://www.nre.vic.gov.au.../39/fire19m.htm)