

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATION > BUSHFIRE-READY NEIGHBOURHOODS NEWSLETTER

Issue 15 • Response to the 2019 Bushfires Edition • May 2019



Helping Tasmanian communities to work together to prevent, prepare for and respond to bushfires.

Welcome to edition number 15 of the Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods newsletter.

This edition features:

- Public information and the 2019 bushfire season
- Media Liaison in Incident Management Teams
- Social media during bushfires
- Tasmania Fire Service's portable automatic weather Stations – How these inform our warnings
- Community messaging and public information – 2019 bushfire season – Some stats on 2019 bushfire season.

Public information and the 2019 bushfire season

It's been a very busy bushfire season, with large fires burning across our state. In our roles within the Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program, we have all developed skills in community and stakeholder engagement. As a part of an Incident Management Team (IMT) dealing with a fire, we have been able to transfer those skills into the public information space. In the months after Christmas I have been involved in the IMT, predominantly in the northern region, dealing with the Great Pine Tier fire as a Public Information Officer. This has been an exciting learning curve and I have developed many new skills in this role.

In the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIIMS) structure the Public Information team works alongside other key areas such as Logistics, Operations, Planning & Intelligence, Resourcing and more. The role of Public Information Officer involves working closely with the Incident Controller, IMT, State Public Information Officer and State Operations Media. In my time at Youngtown, the Public Information Unit generally had two other people, an Alerts and Warnings Officer and a Community/Media Liaison Officer. Public Information is exactly as it sounds. The team is responsible for:

- Issuing timely and accurate warnings and alerts
- Engaging with the local communities through a range of mechanisms, such as weekly newsletter updates, community meetings and/or drop-in sessions
- Media support and liaison on the fireground.

All of our approaches to the when and where of how we deliver this service to the community is based on a collective skills set, intel from the IMT and responding to community-identified needs. The Public Information Officer works within



Family Bushfire Survival Planning, Mt Rumney

the chain of command to identify the needs of both the public and the operational processes, seeking accurate and up-to-date information, mobilising roles as required i.e. liaising with statewide public information structures, being a conduit to safe access for media, and working with AIIIMS procedures to ensure all work is done in a safe and accurate manner.

In my time at Youngtown we were faced with many Emergency Warnings and consequent evacuations. These were coordinated with the Incident Controller, SES who triggers the opening of evacuation centres, and Tasmania Police, who evacuated the areas involved. By working alongside other stakeholders and bringing a coordinated approach, the Public Information Unit was to issue timely warnings.

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Tasmania Fire Service

fire.tas.gov.au/brn

Media liaison in Incident Management Teams

Media liaison is a function of the Public Information section of an IMT. Usually employed on an 'as needed' basis, media liaison provides liaison support for media organisations during a campaign fire or larger incident. Sometimes combined with media escort roles, both are essential to providing information to communities on a broader scale through mainstream radio and television.

Providing timely and up-to-date information to the public from a central source is critical in the response phase of any emergency, particularly, in relation to fast-moving bushfires. Mainstream media is a fast and usually reliable mechanism for reaching a large number of people at one time with up-to-date information, warnings and forecasts of what has happened, what might happen and what will happen. Checking the accuracy of the information provided is an important function for Media Liaison Officers (MLOs) who will sometimes need to provide briefings and talking points to the media from the Public Information Unit Media Office or the Public Information Officer or the Incident Controller.

Working in media liaison can involve arranging and conducting media briefings and on-camera interviews, which includes coordinating with Incident Controllers and other internal stakeholders from partner agencies such as Parks and Wildlife Service and Sustainable Timbers Tasmania, State and local government representatives, organising meeting points and venues, sometimes arranging access through closed road areas onto firegrounds and notifying various media organisations. Sometimes we need to arrange a backdrop such as fire trucks, helicopters or firefighters. Most of this is done on a daily basis, especially during fast moving or escalating incidents such as seen this summer across Tasmania.

Another function can include arranging site and fireground visits for media. Most of the fire footage seen by television viewers during these incidents is managed by TFS Media Liaison and Media Escort personnel from the Public Information Unit. MLOs will usually receive instructions from the Public Information Officer but can also include the Incident Controller or requests from the media for specific footage or activities. It then becomes the MLO's job to make all this happen in time for presentation onto the nightly news timeslots or radio broadcasts.

When you watch the nightly news reporters presenting a story about a fire or incident with a host of backdrops, you can be guaranteed there is a Public Information Officer or MLO standing close by, behind the camera.



Tasmania Fire Service Operations Officer Steve Lowe addressing the Media at a press conference in Miena



The media gets a close view of a helicopter water bombing at Reynolds Neck

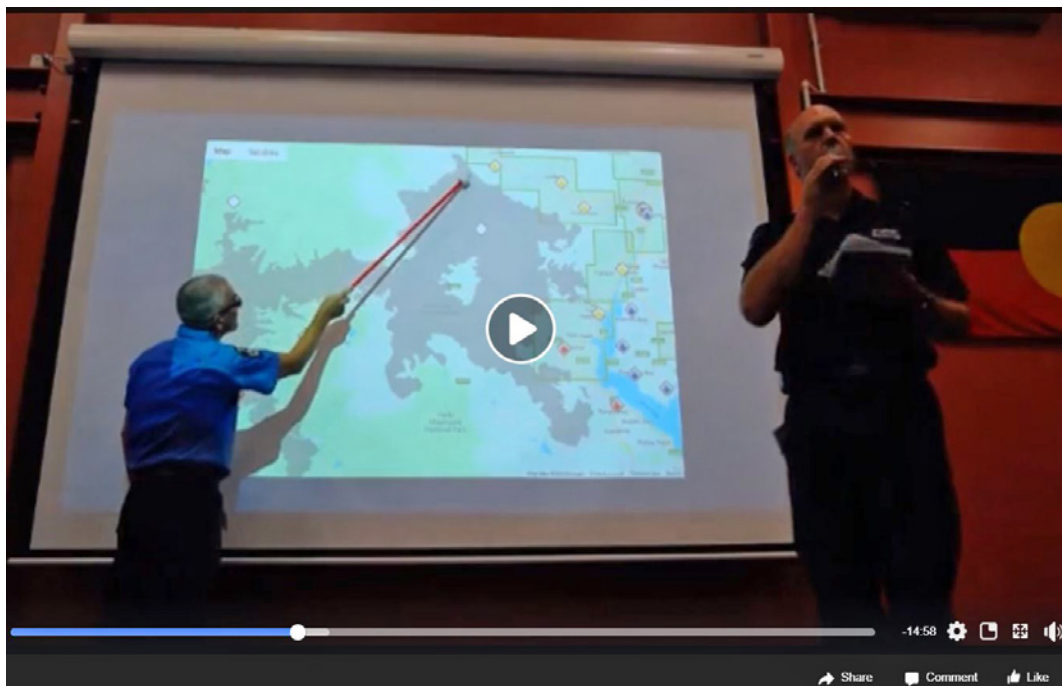


Multi-agency collaboration: Tasmania Police, Tasmania Fire Service Public Information, State Emergency Service Volunteers, Interstate Assistance and Northern Regional Chief Jeff Harper (Department of Premier and Cabinet)

It is certainly an interesting and somewhat challenging task coordinating three levels of government, several layers of media and agency representatives to all be in the same place at the same time, especially during a major incident.

David Cleaver – Community Development Officer North





Live stream of Huonville Community Briefing

Social media during bushfires

The value of verification in a virtual world – Social media in a bushfire emergency

With the increased use of electronic devices for social interactions and instantaneous news of events, social media can play a vital role in a disaster emergency.

The use of social media during a bushfire enables real-time dissemination of fire behaviour updates and warnings from lead agencies. It creates opportunities for people

to provide eye-witness accounts of what is happening in their neighbourhood and act as a support network within affected communities.

Below we take a look at a variety of uses and perspectives on social media during the recent Riveaux Road fire, as described by agencies, community and residents.

Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) Public Information Officer

“TFS uses social media through the platforms of Facebook and Twitter primarily as a one-way communication tool regarding current fires.

During the 2019 dry lightning fires, TFS live-streamed media conferences on social media. These statewide briefings had broader emergency response themes, like the latest situation with fires across the state, numbers of fire responders, interstate support, and resources being deployed in regions.

On 24 January, when moving into several days of extremely challenging fire weather across the state, the briefing video “Chief Officer, Chris Arnol Urges Tasmanians to Prepare For High Fire Danger” was viewed 77,000 times, had 211 comments and was shared 1,764 times.”

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Social media during bushfires *Continued from page 3*

Huon Valley Council Emergency Management Coordinator

“During the Riveaux Road fires, the regularity of community bushfire meetings evolved due to evacuating residents at the PCYC evacuation centre wanting the most up-to-date bushfire information at two meetings a day.

The importance of live-streaming meetings via Facebook was quickly ascertained due to people passing on information and duplicating maps on their own social media sites. To make sure information was not misinterpreted, there was a communications-media role developed to monitor social media threads, video and stream the meetings and share key messages on the Huon Valley Council Facebook page.

For people who had evacuated their animals to the refuge, the live streaming was brilliant because they didn't have to leave their animals to go to these meetings. This also worked well because the venues would not have been able to take the capacity of all residents wanting to come to the meetings. The routine of tuning in to twice-daily bushfire updates was well received.

Once the streaming of meetings became ‘the new normal’ there was an expectation that all meetings would be live streamed, which proved to be difficult once the fire downscaled, the evacuation centre was closed, support from other councils ceased and the community transitioned into recovery.

At the peak time during the fires when there were a number of emergency alerts, there were up to 900 live regular viewers of meetings. From 24 January to 14 February there were 15 streamed meetings that received over 90,900 views.”

Tasmanian Bushfires 2019 Information Facebook Administrator

“When the Riveaux Road fires were impacting Huon Valley areas and people were evacuating, I was looking at all the local social media closed groups and found that there was a lot of panic, speculation and over exaggeration of the facts. So I started the Tasmanian Bushfires 2019 Information site. I think I was trying to ease my anxiety by helping other people, which helped me cope. I was also trying to promote a sense of community when there was so much potential for negative discourse.

Things go bad when people can't get the right information, but once they get the facts they are OK. The whole point of social media in an emergency is to get the information out as fast and as correct as you can. There are always going to be people who won't behave; but everybody behaved on this social media channel. There was no arguing, there was on occasion a difference of opinion, but people were well behaved.

During the fire activity there were a lot of images shared. I decided to create montages in an attempt to provide the community with some visual reference and reassurance that the firefighters were doing their best and all was not lost. If people can see ‘firies’ doing their jobs near them, then they can be reassured.

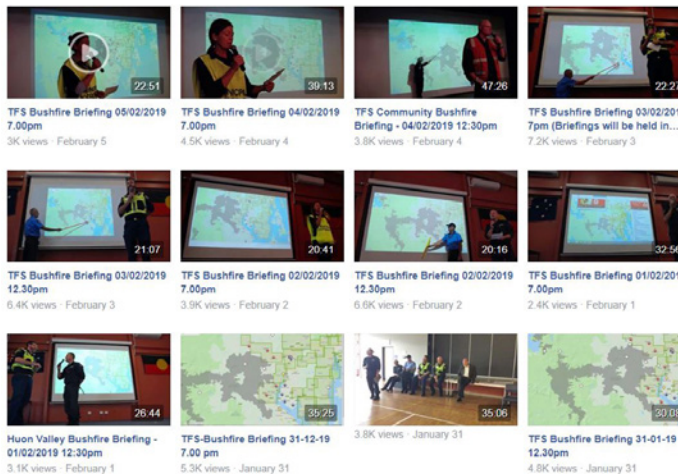
I thought the streaming of the bushfire meetings and sharing on social media was a good way for people to stay at home, be informed and not travelling during a risky time.”

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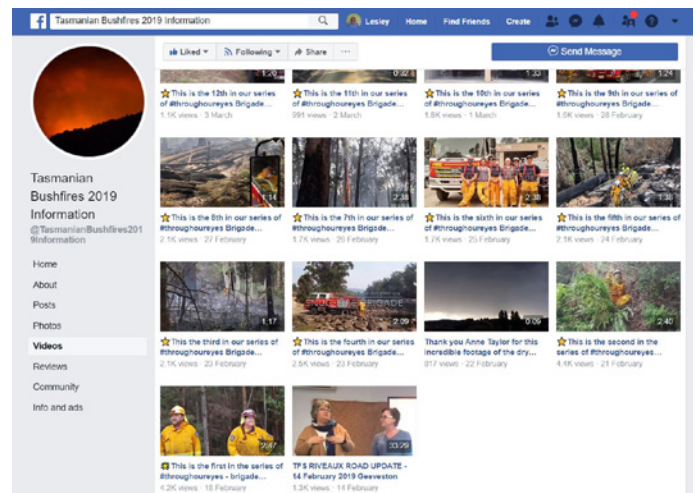


Social media during bushfires

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Live streams of briefings available to watch at a convenient time on the Huon Valley Council website



Tasmanian Bushfires Information 2019

Huon Valley resident and parent of young children under threat of the fire

"I trawled TasALERT, Tahune Fires Help Group and the Huon Valley Council Facebook pages almost constantly during the weeks of the Riveaux Road fires. The TasALERT social media feed was great because it meant we were kept up to date with alert levels as they changed in real time rather than having to constantly check the TFS website. That site was also well organised because they deleted out of date alert messages when alert levels changed. This helped to ensure that I was reading the most up-to-date information.

The Tahune Fires Help Group is a local, closed Facebook group which was a big help for support. When we were doing our hourly overnight property checks, it was reassuring to see others online who were awake and checking their properties too. It restored my faith in the local community to see strangers supporting each other. It was very powerful.

We watched the bushfire information meetings live streamed via the Huon Valley Council Facebook site, which was perfect for us. These recorded meetings meant we could each sit down whenever we had a few spare moments and keep ourselves informed without having to leave the house.

Having small children meant that we couldn't have the ABC radio on all the time. We had bad reception, so the constant static in the background was hard to listen to and the daily content was not really our style. I found social media to be the most useful way for us to get up-to-date fire information."

Huon Valley senior resident and evacuee

"I mostly got my bushfire information from listening to ABC news and the TFS website.

I used Facebook a little but not all the time because we don't always get the internet where we live, it's a bit patchy. Whenever I saw anything on social media I then referred to the TFS website to verify the information. People were making statements and exaggerations that weren't accurate. I was most confident with getting more accurate information from the TFS website."

Lesley King – Project Officer, Disaster Resilience Education



Tasmania Fire Service

fire.tas.gov.au/brn

Something a little bit different – How the IMT's Intelligence Unit informs Warnings and Alerts



A Tasmania Fire Service portable automatic weather station installed at a remote location on the Zeehan complex of fires. Sometimes we walk or fly long distances into sites because there is not suitable road access



Checking fuel moisture in the path of the Riveaux Road fire so we can more accurately predict the fire's rate of spread

This summer I managed the Tasmania Fire Service's portable automatic weather stations, or PAWS as we like to call them. The TFS has three, and can access another three from the Parks and Wildlife Service if needed. These are managed on a statewide basis and are installed close to fires where there isn't a Bureau of Meteorology weather station nearby. PAWS send us information on temperature, wind speed and direction, humidity, via mobile or satellite links. All important information for understanding fire behaviour. We use the information from these PAWS, along with fire observations from the ground and air, to help predict what the fire may do. These predictions are what we use to plan what we are going to do next to extinguish the fire, and what warnings to issue to the public.

You may have been curious as to how we work out which warning to issue, and how we work out the estimated time of impact for communities. When we issue a warning that we expect a fire to impact a community within a certain time period, this is an estimate that uses the information from the PAWS and field fire observers, the weather forecast information from the BOM, and computer modelling of the expected fire spread. This information is interpreted by our fire behaviour analysts, who use their experience to predict as closely as we are able to what the fire is likely to do on the ground. These predictions are then provided to our public information officers who will write the warnings that are provided to the public.

The weather information collected by our PAWS is also used by the BOM to make more accurate weather forecasts for areas that may be affected by fires.

If you live in an area that is close to a fire, and doesn't have a BOM weather station close by, then it is possible that we will install one of our PAWS nearby. This is good for your preparedness because not only will you get a more accurate weather forecast from the BOM and more accurate warnings from TFS, the information collected by the PAWS is available to the public on the BOM website. You can use all this information to keep yourself and your family safe, because it will enable you to make better decisions based on your pre-planned trigger points in your bushfire survival plan if a bushfire is close, or if your pre-planned Fire Danger Index trigger points are likely to occur.

One of our PAWS was installed at Geeveston last summer, as the nearest fully operating BOM weather station is quite a distance away, at either Grove or a daily 9am observation at Dover. As you can imagine, the weather at Grove can be quite different than at Geeveston, so this PAWS was really important in helping us to provide information for communities and controlling the Riveaux Road fire.

Next time there is a fire near you, have a look at the Tasmanian Observations page of the BOM website, scroll all the way to the bottom where you will find the 'mobile' weather stations. It's likely that myself, or another member of the Intelligence Unit, will have been out and installed a PAWS near you. You never know, you might get a call or a knock on the door from TFS asking if we can please install one at your property!

Emma Gardner, A/Community Development Officer – South



Community messaging and public information – 2019 bushfire season – Some statistics

During the 2019 bushfires, significant investment was placed on providing accurate and timely information to the public as well as allowing opportunities for the community to engage with TFS around the bushfires.

Alerts and warnings

At the peak of the 2019 Tasmanian bushfires there were **12 Emergency Warnings**, **9 Watch and Act**, and **15 Advice Messages** (31/1) in place statewide. The TFS publishing system does not currently have a reporting capability to provide any more detail than this. **Thirty Telstra Emergency Alerts** were issued during the campaign. A large number of Smoke Alerts were also issued during the campaign.

Feedback provided to date has confirmed the alerts and warnings issued were aligned with the National Warning Principles (AFAC, 2018). Warnings were lifesaving, empowering, trusted, authoritative and verifiable, scaled based on risk, timely, targeted and tailored, conveyed impact, included a call to action, and were clearly communicated, readily accessible and part of the bigger picture.

Community meetings

Since the Conley's Point bushfire on South Bruny Island on Christmas Day 2018, over **41 community meetings** have taken place in the locations listed below. This included multiple meetings on some days. Significant numbers of people attended community meetings, with up to 500 people attending some of the meetings in Huonville and Geeveston. On average 150 to 200 people attended meetings. The first community meeting was held on Bruny Island on 25 December 2018, and the final meeting was held at Geeveston on 14 February 2019.

- Bothwell = 1 (27/1)
- Miena = 4 (17/1, 27/1, 1/2, 8/2)
- Geeveston = 11 (18/1, 20/1, 22/1, 24/1, 29/1, 31/1, 14/2)
- Huonville = 15 (27/1, 28/1, 29/1, 30/1, 3/2, 4/2, 5/2)
- Dover = 1 (30/1)
- Cygnet = 1 (31/1)
- Maydena = 3 (5/1, 27/1, 3/2)
- Hamilton = 1 (5/1)



Deputy Chief Officer Bruce Byatt briefing the media

- Bruny Island = 1 (25/12)
- Roseberry = 1 (28/1)
- Zeehan = 1 (28/1)

A number of community meetings were live streamed by the Huon Valley Council and the community. On average, approximately 3000 people tuned in. For one community update (live FB), 15,000 people tuned into the meetings that were live streamed.

Media briefings

During the 43 days that the State Operations Centre operated, **in excess of 20 state media briefings** were conducted at the State Operations Centre. The majority of these media briefings were multi-agency briefings. Often consisting of TFS, PWS, Tasmania Police and STT representatives speaking, media briefings sometimes involved the Bureau of Meteorology, the Premier, the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Management, and the Recovery Coordinator Michael Stephens. A sign language interpreter was also used on most occasions to ensure we were reaching the deaf population. A number of the media briefings were also live streamed to TFS Facebook. Some briefings were also held at Regional Operations centres, with Incident Management Teams, and in the field.

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Community messaging and public information – Some stats on 2019 bushfire season

TFS media releases

Since the Conley's Point bushfire on South Bruny Island on Christmas day 2018, approximately **80 TFS bushfire related media releases** were issued to the Tasmania media and the TFS website.

Total Fire Bans

9 Total Fire Bans were issued between 1 January and 15 February.

Other public information mediums

Other public information mediums included ABC radio, social media, community bulletins, and education material and stakeholder engagement. During the peak times of the bushfire campaign, TFS had staff dedicated to being the TFS spokesperson on ABC radio and some secondary radio channels as well as TV.

Peter Middleton, Coordinator Community Development



Dover community meeting

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Public information and the 2019 bushfire season

As I reflect on my time in the role, I feel it a great privilege to not only connect with individuals from affected communities but to play a significant role in ensuring, as much as possible, the safety of the public facing a bushfire. It was a delight to work alongside such motivated professionals in the Unit and to share knowledge and experience with our NSW Rural Fire

Service colleagues who joined the team. I am grateful that the skills I have developed in BRN and working with communities have set me in good stead to be able to contribute to the operations when an incident occurs.

Suzette Harrison, Community Development Officer North West



Tasmania Fire Service

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