

COMMUNITY EDUCATION > BUSHFIRE READY NEWSLETTER



Issue 5 • Community Liaison, Bushfire Season 2015/16 • April 2016

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

Welcome to edition number 5 of the Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods newsletter. The theme for this edition is community liaison as part of our bushfire management, linking prevention, preparedness and response.

Summer saw a busy time for TFS staff and volunteers with a campaign that stretched in excess of 50 days over 7 weeks. It involved 20 staff from across TFS, Parks & Wildlife Service, Forestry Tasmania and interstate who worked with over 30 communities in undertaking community liaison and public information.

The TFS Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods team in collaboration with TFS Fuel Reduction Unit Community Engagement Officers worked to keep communities well informed by undertaking on-ground community liaison.

We also kept the public informed through: the internet; drop-in sessions; media liaison; community education; escorts for beekeepers and other stakeholders; and stakeholder engagement.

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For more information on how to contact the team visit www.fire.tas.gov.au/brn



Image: courtesy of The Examiner Newspaper

Deloraine Evacuation Centre provides respite from fires

In January a number of fires at Lake McKenzie, Mersey Forest, in the Western Tiers threatened communities in the Meander Valley municipality. Communities under threat were Western Creek, Meander, Golden Valley, Jackeys Marsh, Mole Creek, Caveside, Chudleigh, Bracknell, Lorinna and Deloraine.

As of 20 January the total burnt area was 6,422 hectares with a perimeter of 40 kilometres, thick smoke and ash affected Meander Valley towns and many residents had views of the fires burning in the Tiers from their homes. Fires threatened key infrastructure and native flora and fauna with high cultural and tourist values.

On 20 January, as part of the community liaison strategy, a community meeting was held at the Deloraine Community Complex by the Incident Controller and a Community Liaison Officer. The meeting provided up-to-date fires information for community members. This event was well attended by over 200 people and included key information about impacts of smoke and embers, where to find the latest bushfire information in changing conditions, the extent of the fire boundary and resources on the ground attending the fire. The Incident Controller painted a 'worst case scenario' for residents in fire-affected areas, urging them to prepare for the worst.

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As a result of concerns for public safety and our priority to protect people, an Evacuation Centre was set up at the Deloraine Community Complex from 9am the following day. Residents were able to seek bushfire information and to register with Red Cross. Meander Valley Council established the Evacuation Centre, providing refreshments and accommodation for relocating residents. Many local residents popped in during this time with donations of food and water to share with evacuating residents.

At the centre a TFS Community Liaison Officer was available to chat with people, showing fire boundary maps and providing the most up-to-date bushfire information. The officer was on hand to help residents with their bushfire survival plans and discuss their plans to leave early or stay and defend.

Debra Ong of Red Cross said, “When the call went out to help at the Deloraine Evacuation Centre, the Red Cross Emergency Services team were activated to provide registration, inquiry and personal support assistance at the centre. Meander Valley Council has worked closely with Red Cross to access training and resources to better prepare the municipality for disaster events.”

Red Cross volunteers were on hand to provide a listening ear and support residents with a registration system called, Register. Find. Reunite, which helps reconnect people when they have been separated by an emergency. It informs loved ones and emergency services, so they know who has evacuated safely.

At about 8pm in the evening of 21 January there was an influx of many Mole Creek residents as the fires looked to be moving out of the hills and down onto the farm lands in the area. That evening the Meander Valley Council assisted 12 people who had evacuated their homes with accommodation.

“This was the first time that an evacuation centre had been



Image: courtesy of Australian Red Cross

set up in Meander Valley and council staff were grateful for the assistance of Australian Red Cross, Tasmania Fire Service and the Tasmanian Health Service in responding to community expectations and needs. All in all, it was a highly valuable learning experience for all concerned.”

Patrick Gambles, Social Recovery Coordinator Meander Valley Council.

For a number of days the Deloraine Community Complex provided ongoing community support for many residents of the Meander Valley. Positive outcomes for the community at the evacuation centre emphasises the importance of multi-agency response and collaboration of community services in a common goal of safety for all. The multi-agency bushfire response and the prioritising of issuing warnings, protecting people and assets meant that there was no loss of life nor homes destroyed in these fires.

In an emergency, use Australia Red Cross Register. Find. Reunite by completing your details online <https://register.redcross.org.au>.

Lesley King, Community Development Officer (South)

Cost of disasters

In Australia, natural disasters have incurred billions of dollars in tangible costs to individuals, businesses and governments.

In March, the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities released ‘The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters’. This report looks at the costs and long-term social impacts of natural disasters in Australia and finds the social costs of natural disasters in 2015 were at least equal to the physical costs. The report makes four key recommendations:

- Pre- and post-disaster funding should better reflect the long-term nature of social impacts

- A collaborative approach involving government, business, not-for-profits and community is needed to address the economic costs of the social impacts of natural disasters
- Governments, businesses and communities need to further invest in community resilience programs that drive learning and sustained behaviour change
- Further research must be done into ways of quantifying the medium- and long-term costs of the social impacts of natural disasters.

To read more visit: <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/our-papers/social-costs-report>



Community liaison in north-west Tasmania

What a bushfire season we have had in Tasmania and especially on the North West! There were upwards of 80 fires at one point across Tasmania and the largest one on the North West was the Pipeline Road, Mawbanna fire being larger than all the other fires put together. I guess you might have wondered what we Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhood staff do during this time. Good question. My involvement in the fire incidents began on Friday 15 January when I received a call from Peter Middleton, coordinator of the Community Liaison function for incident management, with the information about the fires having started from dry lightning strikes on 13 January. 'Can you go to Zeehan to do Community Liaison Suzette?' In the time I was involved with the fires I worked across Zeehan, Deloraine, Golden Valley, Meander, Arthur River, Mawbanna, Rocky Cape and Myalla.

What is Community Liaison about? It is important for people to be able to make informed decisions and to have not only current and accurate information, but connections with Tasmania Fire Service, Tasmania Police, SES, Parks, Council and other organisations involved in managing fires. The role of Community Liaison is effectively a conduit for information directly from TFS operations to communities that is accurate, timely, relevant, consistent and authorised. From feedback I have received, it is clear that this face-to-face connection helps people inform their actions with their Bushfire Survival Planning, develop more accurate situational awareness and to connect them not only with emergency service responders but with their broader communities and neighbours.

The Community Liaison role functions within the Public Information Unit (PIU) which is an arm of the Incident Management Team (IMT). The Public Information Unit works vigilantly to get information out to the public through issuing Alerts and Warnings, updating the TFS website, stakeholder liaison, media liaison, development and distributions of newsletters and more. In working closely with the PIU we developed plans on the best way to get the key messages out to the broader community about the current fire situations. My role involved primarily coordinating community meetings and facilitating drop-in sites.

One of the community meetings was held at Myalla where more than 120 people attended. Speakers included:

- Acting Regional Chief, NW Shane Batt provided an update about the Pipeline Road, Mawbanna fire, information on operational responses to the fire, what was happening with Alert levels (Myalla, Lapoinya, Meunna, Milabena were on a Watch and Act), weather patterns and predictions and updates about the supports from NSW, Victoria and New Zealand



Mawbanna Bushfire Community Meeting

- Wayne Richards, SES Regional Manager NW spoke about the processes involved with SES issuing the need for an Evacuation Centre which would have been located at Wynyard
- Chris Fagg, Municipal Emergency Management Coordinator with the Waratah-Wynyard Council spoke about the practicalities of coming to an Evacuation Centre including: registering that you had left your premises, registering animals and the need for planning for your pets, bringing medication and more
- I spoke about the need for planning and preparation and using the time to complete Bushfire Survival Plans, making sure everyone was on the same page within family circles, developing situational awareness, knowing what would be triggers for action and looking out for neighbours.

After the speakers had finished it was time for the audience to ask any questions that they had.

Coming from my role in the Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program, how did I see Community Liaison? This was a very interesting experience to watch how the Tasmania Fire Service responded to fire events and this was a large and protracted experience. In my meetings with people both formal and informal, I found communities and individuals to be thankful for the work being done and for having a face-to-face point of contact for information. Somehow it seemed to ease people, undo misinformation, make connections within communities and empower people to make choices. I found the role of Community Liaison to be very rewarding as I connected with people in a time that was challenging, at times scary and protracted. What a rewarding and privileged experience it is to be one of the many conduits into people's lives – another way the Tasmania Fire Service and other stakeholders serve their communities in the times of need.

Suzette Harrison, Community Development Officer (North West/North)





Remote fires in south-west Tasmania: keeping communities and stakeholders informed

After a busy week in the North and North West of the state coordinating and undertaking on-ground community liaison, I returned home on a Friday afternoon. I was home for an hour and then the phone rang... It was Phil Douglas, who was undertaking the role of Public Information Officer in the south, predominantly for the fires in south-west Tasmania. "Pete - can you provide someone or can you coordinate a community meeting for residents and travellers at Maydena and Strathgordon?" I have to say I was pretty spent at this time! Phil will attest to this. I went into Cambridge that afternoon and gathered a picture of the current situation with the south-west fires and in particular the Gordon River Road Fire.

Key communities and stakeholder groups for consideration included; Maydena, Strathgordon, beekeepers, businesses and tourists. After gaining a picture I came up with a plan to reach out to all of these communities and groups.

First came community meetings on the Saturday morning at Maydena and Strathgordon. Community meetings were conducted in collaboration with Operations Officer Andrew McConnan. In the planning phase for these meetings it was suggested to me that there could be some disgruntled fisherman at the Maydena road block as there was a

major 40th anniversary fishing competition planned for the February Hobart Regatta long weekend.

Over the next month the Public Information Section at Cambridge and on-ground Community Liaison continued to coordinate community meetings, drop-in sessions, provision of stakeholder information to tourists, businesses, escorts into fire affected areas for beekeepers, film makers, industry and others. These escorts involved a large number of people over several months. A large thanks must go to all involved in this important task including volunteer brigades and TFS staff.

Community Liaison provided an important link to surrounding communities of south-west Tasmania. It allowed information to be provided, questions to be asked and systems to be improved. One small issue that had potential to turn into a bigger issue was the location of a road block near Maydena on the Gordon River Road. Initially the road block did not allow public access to the tourist locations of the Styx and Florentine Valleys. Through providing opportunities for the community to talk with TFS we were able to shift the road block and allow access to these areas and still maintain safety for the public.

Peter Middleton (Community Development Coordinator)



Arthur River community liaison

Community liaison forms a link between emergency managers, land managers, residents, government and business during emergencies.

During major emergencies such as the recent Arthur River Fire, the community as a whole needed to be kept informed and up to date with the latest emergency information. Information may be provided in many ways but normally by face-to-face engagement where Community Liaison staff will be onsite to talk with community members, business and partner agencies, government and residents.

TFS staff manned the Arthur River Parks and Wildlife office on several occasions during this period providing on the spot information to the community as the fire approached, then after the fire.

Informed and connected communities will normally prepare and respond to emergencies better than when no information is provided. Knowledge of fire behaviour, fuels and weather conditions help build a picture of what to expect when the fire arrives. However, there is no doubt that being prepared is the key to surviving emergencies.

The community at Arthur River attended a large community meeting at the Parks office where a wide variety of speakers from Parks, TFS, Police, DHHS and Council delivered information about existing fire activity, the actual fire event and where to from here. These types of gatherings allowed everyone to be on the same page by providing accurate information from a wide range of perspectives about a specific event. They enable agencies to provide information for communities about issues such as road closures, fire activity, access to support, health and safety issues such as drinking water, the effects of smoke, condition of infrastructure, time lines and ongoing firefighting activities. Equally important is the flow of information from communities during emergencies back to agencies, which can be highly valuable.

Many questions come out of these types of emergency events with a natural reaction from many being, 'Why did this happen?', 'Is there someone to blame?', 'Who pays?'. In general, communities pull together when faced with adversity, because human instinct of survival brings people together. If communities plan together, prepare together and act together, results and outcomes will be improved.

Weather and fire conditions of January and February 2016 certainly showed how unexpected these fires were.



Image courtesy of Warren Frey, TFS.

Communities across the State were forced to make decisions about their safety, some decisions needed to be made at the last minute with very short notice, and many people found their Bushfire Survival Planning was an enormous help when it was time to act.

Not everyone chooses to Stay and Defend and TFS promotes the safest option as being, Leaving Early. Those who choose to Stay and Defend may find that defending under certain conditions is unrealistic and may be forced to leave at the last minute. This can be the most dangerous decision we need to make as leaving at this time will expose you to a whole new set of dangers and challenges. Knowing WHERE you need to go is crucial in your decision to Stay and Defend. Knowing WHEN to go is just as crucial.

Choosing to Leave Early sees similar decisions to be made. When to go and where to go? How long will you be there? What should I take? How do I get there? These questions are part of your planning process so, once again, knowledge is the key to planning, writing your plan down is crucial, rehearsing your plan is important. Maybe even taking a drive to your Nearby Safer Place to see how long it will take to get there. Consider, can I drive there or will I need to walk? Which route will be safe to get there? Is there more than one route to get there?

Bushfire survival planning works! Knowledge is the key. Plan early, be aware. Be prepared. Seek information. Work as a community. Plan to survive.

David Cleaver (Community Development Officer (North))



Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program round 1 update

Round 1 of the multi-national award winning Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods BRN program is coming to a close and Round 2 community selection has recently begun.

Round 1 of the BRN program started at the beginning of 2014, working with 16 core communities and reaching out in a targeted way to over 50 communities since 2009. As core business for TFS, BRN will begin working with a new round of communities in July 2016. This will include 15 to 20 communities working for approximately a two year period.

Round 2 will see the continuation of some works with some of the communities from round 1, new communities and ongoing work with communities the team has been working with since 2009.

Peter Middleton (Community Development Coordinator)

Resilient Australia Awards applications open for 2016

Nominations for the 2016 Resilient Australia Awards are open. The awards are a national program to recognise and promote initiatives that strengthen community disaster resilience. Disaster resilience is about making our communities safer, stronger and better prepared to manage natural disasters by celebrating innovation and best practice. The TFS Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods program was a national winner in 2014.

For further information, visit the Resilient Australia Awards portal resilient.awardsplatform.com

Photos from around the State



Arthur River & Temma (Image courtesy of Warren Frey, TFS)



Mt Rumney Bushfire-Ready Neighbourhoods Field Day



Burn Table Demonstration at Lachlan

1800 000 699

www.fire.tas.gov.au/brn

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