

CASE STUDY

EMV/CS (01) July 2014

Evacuation: Grampians Communities 2014



ABOUT CASE STUDIES

A Case Study is a descriptive, explanatory, written story based upon a real life example; its storytelling is a form of discussion that tells of a meaningful experience. This helps to transfer knowledge to a reader/listener and to build capabilities in others.

It aims to build mental models and increase the number of memories in the memory bank. This is to improve decision making in time critical situations which lead to better outcomes.

A case study doesn't preach or blame, it passes on learnings from the perspective of those involved.

A Case Study can be used by both the "Beginner" and "Expert" alike.

INTRODUCTION

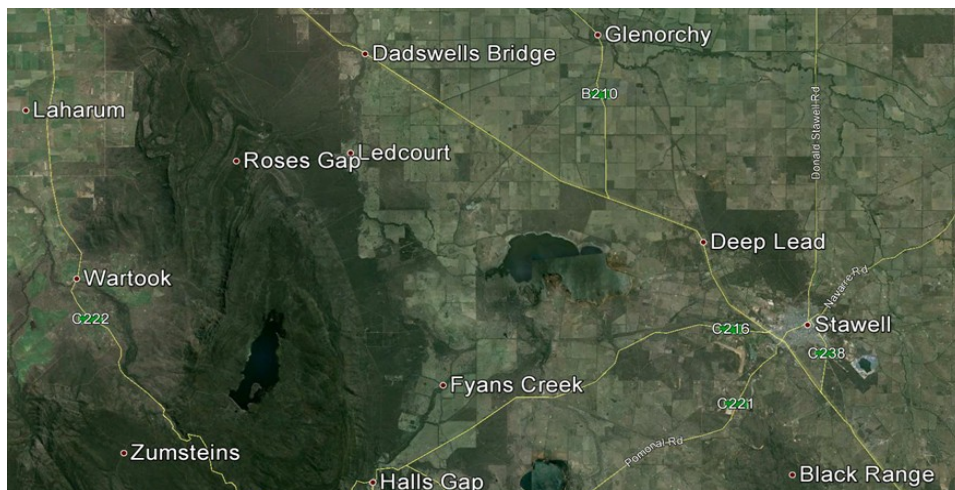
The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) recommended sweeping changes to Victoria's Bushfire Safety Policy following the events of 7 February, 2009. These recommendations included a move to introduce ***"a comprehensive approach to evacuation, so that this option is planned, considered and implemented when it is likely to offer a higher level of protection than other contingency options"***.

When the interim report of the VBRC was released in August 2009, some consideration was given to the term "relocation" but in the final report released in July 2010 it became clear evacuation was indeed considered as one means of protecting life. Fire and emergency management agencies were well advanced in the development of policy, procedures and guidelines to provide the framework for this to be undertaken. Extensive training, exercising and briefing followed amongst the sector in Victoria until a robust set of arrangements were established. The first generation of these arrangements were in place prior to the 2010/11 Fire Danger Period (FDP). Subsequent amendments, concluded prior to the 2011/12 FDP, saw the arrangements mature until the implementation of what we have today.

Since the original implementation there has not been a formal recommendation to evacuate, utilising the end-to-end process, issued for any fire in Victoria until this year when in January and February 2014, evacuation was recommended during seven bushfires, all of which affected Victorian communities.

The first of these formal evacuations was for the towns of Halls Gap, Dadswells Bridge, Pomonal, and surrounding communities of the Grampians in the state's west.

This **Case Study** reviews the first formal use of this end-to-end evacuation process.



WHAT HAPPENED?

On Wednesday 15 January 2014 a band of lightning crossed through Victoria igniting numerous bushfires. Amongst the most affected areas were the Grampians in western Victoria.



Multiple lightning strikes started fires in the tinder dry bush and several were already spreading before dusk that evening. Throughout the night the fires continued to grow and by dawn the following day a number were already showing significant potential. One area being focused on by the combined firefighting resources from CFA and DEPI/NEO was in the National Park, near Roses Gap, in the northern Grampians.

Throughout Thursday strong and gusty north easterly winds continued to push this fire towards Wartook and private land to the south west. By early evening three fires had converged into one large fire in the Northern Grampians. Throughout the night fire activity showed little sign of abating and by dawn the fire had grown to approximately 11,000Ha, and impacted on a large number of properties in the Wartook Valley and Brimpaen area.

Ground observations from firefighters and infrared linescan enhanced *Phoenix* spread prediction modelling. Based on this information and consideration of potential consequences, the Incident Controller then made the recommendation for evacuation of Halls Gap, Pomonal, Dadswells Bridge and surrounding areas. As a result of this, Victoria Police, in consultation with the IMT, developed an Evacuation Plan for implementation prior to the expected fire impact on Friday afternoon. This process commenced late on Thursday night and concluded in the early hours of Friday morning.

The first objective was to identify how many homes were within the affected area, which was done by liaising with the local Shire. Although approximately 600 houses within the identified evacuation area, it was recognised an unknown number of these were holiday homes. Another consideration was the number of caravan and holiday parks within the township. Three local residents in the Halls Gap township were identified by Police when the vulnerable persons register was accessed; these people were contacted individually early Friday morning.

A formula was developed, identifying it would take four hours and require 84 people to door knock all houses. Mapping of the affected areas allowed sectors to be allocated to small teams, with a senior police member assigned to oversee each team. Traffic Management Points (TMPs) were also identified. Public meetings were planned for early Friday morning in Halls Gap and Dadswells Bridge.

A large number of police were recalled to duty from Stawell, Horsham and other surrounding Police Stations. In addition, an urgent request for further police resources was made to Melbourne. Victoria Police members, with support from Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) and other agency personnel, were allocated to door knocking and other elements of the evacuation process.

Information provided to the community from the IMT focussed on ensuring people in affected areas were aware of the gravity of the situation.

At the Halls Gap and Dadswells Bridge community meetings, local residents and tourists were informed of the situation and the recommendation to evacuate. The recommendation to evacuate was also provided via Emergency Alert during the meetings. Emergency service personnel with extensive local knowledge presented during the meeting. There were fewer people than expected at the Halls Gap meeting; it was ascertained most of the people holidaying there had already left due to them taking notice of the information and warnings already provided by the IMT.



"They all started leaving last night when they saw the big red glow on top of the mountain."

- Halls Gap Resident

The Recommendation to Evacuate provided by the Incident Controller specified the evacuation travel routes to relief centres established at Stawell, Ararat and Horsham.

The door knock commenced five hours before the expected impact of the fire which was predicted to be early afternoon. During the door knock, resident's details and their intentions to withdraw or remain were recorded. The door knock was suspended prior to completion due to the weather change arriving earlier than expected and removing the threat to Halls Gap. TMPs were set up to permit access for emergency service personnel only.

The withdrawal stage went smoothly with people leaving in an orderly manner. There were no traffic issues identified during this stage.



Halls Gap following evacuation

The weather throughout Friday afternoon proved to be less severe than predicted and the wind change arrived earlier. As a result the fire did not run as expected, sparing the township of Halls Gap from direct impact. The Wartook Valley, Roses Gap and surrounding areas were still affected. One community member tragically lost their life during the fire prior to the evacuation. The Halls Gap township remained closed to all but emergency personnel and those members of the public who had decided not to evacuate.

With the immediate danger past, the focus of the IMT became returning residents to their homes as quickly and safely as possible. The IMT applied the same principles for this as for the withdrawal; assessing risks and developing a suitable plan. This required the integration of numerous agencies with the key objective being the return of the community as soon as safely possible. A representative of the Department of Human Services was appointed a Deputy Incident Controller (Recovery) to make the connection between response and recovery seamless.

"Hopefully we can open tomorrow because there will be a few locals looking for a drink"

- Halls Gap business operator

Once it was established, local residents of Wartook, Roses Gap and surrounding areas were initially informed of the fire's impact using geo-referenced aerial photography. This permitted the identification of affected resident's properties and provided them with the immediate assistance they required. The timing and speed of this work was important to ensure the best possible outcome for the community. Residents whose properties were not affected were escorted into the area. This required the collaboration of several agencies to ensure tree hazards, powerlines and other risks were removed as quickly as possible before residents could return.

When it was deemed that Halls Gap was no longer under threat from fire, TMP status changed to allow registered residents access to Halls Gap. These people were issued with wrist bands so they could come and go as they required. The Halls Gap township was reopened to the public at 7am on Sunday 19 January 2014. The Grampians Northern Complex fire eventually consumed 55,100 Ha and lasted 81 days.

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

The dry bushland of the Grampians and the weather experienced during the first day led to the fire's rapid development. The predicted weather for Friday 17 January meant the fire was expected to significantly grow and affect communities in the area.

The informed decision-making of the IMT in applying the strategic control priorities, and in particular the primacy of life, led to the recommendation to evacuate. Equally, the focus of providing information on the seriousness and potential of the fire to the community resulted in many tourists and residents in the area leaving ahead of the evacuation decision.



The people in the Grampians communities have a well developed understanding of the environment, risks and effects of fires based on their experience of recent fire history.

Collaboration between all emergency agencies, effective evacuation planning and implementation of the withdrawal stage also contributed to this activity being undertaken without delay or difficulty.

The focus of the IMT on returning the community to their properties once the danger had passed ensured this was accomplished without delay while also ensuring that the safety and welfare of the community remained the highest priority. The consideration of those who had lost properties and the approach of informing and providing support services to these people in a single location also greatly reduced the impact on recovery agencies and enabled them to undertake their roles more effectively.

"We were in the 2006 fires so we knew exactly what to expect with the smoke, the dust, the lack of light and the preparation for the house and the farm"

- Pomonal resident



"It's pretty daunting when the thing is coming at you from all directions, but I've put 30-odd years of work into this place; it's our home and our life"

- Brimpaen resident

WHAT WORKED WELL?

Application of the Strategic Control Priorities

The IMTs focus for the first two days was to “*get people out of harms way*”, therefore ensuring the protection of life. Once the threat to life had passed the IMT then turned their attention to controlling the fire.

Predictive Services

Predictive Services provided the key information which permitted the IMT to determine the need for evacuation. Phoenix modelling and information from the Bureau of Meteorology was considered to be “very important” to inform decisions made by the IMT.



The intense Grampians fire complex created a 12 km wide convection column, generating its own weather and lightning strikes, sparking smaller spot fires.

Local Knowledge

The application of local knowledge of the Grampians and experience managing fires in this area by many of the people involved in the IMT and EMT contributed to the successful outcomes during this fire and in particular the evacuation.

Emergency Management Teams

Benefits were identified from having a single Incident Emergency Management Team (IEMT) which integrated both response and recovery. All key IMT and IEMT personnel being co-located at the ICC avoided duplication and/or miscommunication of information and decisions. The IMT and IEMT were well connected on the likelihood of the successful achievement of the requirements necessary for the evacuation including information, messaging and resource needs.

Community Meetings

During the community meetings held in the area the recommendation to evacuate was issued, allowing community members to ask questions and seek further advice from Victoria Police and other services. The meetings also presented an opportunity for the community to register their intentions of whether they would withdraw or remain, greatly reducing the time necessary to undertake community door knocking.

Evacuation Planning

Victoria Police members involved in the evacuation planning had completed training but not actually undertaken an evacuation. Training and exercising prepared them well for the challenge, and utilisation of existing guidance documentation ensured the development and implementation of an effective plan.

Delegation

The Incident Controller delegated a Deputy Incident Controller specifically to manage and have oversight of the withdrawal stage in conjunction with the Victoria Police Evacuation Manager. A representative of the Department of Human Services was appointed Deputy Incident Controller (Recovery) during the return stage. These delegations ensured the focus of these critical activities were effectively managed and the appropriate connections between agencies enhanced.

Community Information

The community information provided by the IMT in the lead up to the Recommendation to Evacuate ensured both local residents and tourists were aware of the seriousness of the situation and the dangerous nature of the fire. This resulted in many tourists and residents alike leaving well before the evacuation, leaving only a small number of people to be withdrawn.

During both withdrawal and return stages, community newsletters were developed, providing a single source of vital community information.

Relief/Recovery

A Deputy Incident Controller (Recovery), as outlined above, made the connection between response and recovery seamless and assisted in ensuring community relief/recovery needs were addressed effectively and efficiently.



WHAT COULD WE IMPROVE ON?

Evacuation Management Team

Providing only two Victoria Police members to plan and document the entire evacuation plan placed enormous pressure on these people. Resourcing a larger team to undertake these activities would allow the Evacuation Manager to manage rather than being involved in tactical activities.

The provision of more people in the Evacuation Team would also reduce the need for the Evacuation Manager to leave the ICC to oversee the plan implementation. Removing this key person from the ICC at a critical time during the withdrawal stage was considered to present opportunities for communication and implementation breakdowns.

Documentation

Existing guidance documentation relating to evacuation was limited to the withdrawal stage. In the Grampians case, the Evacuation Manager and IMT developed some of the documents used in the return stage but identified this as a future improvement which would ensure the return stage decision making was documented, reducing time developing the plan and ensuring consistency when applied at different incidents.

Return Stage

A greater focus on the return stage of evacuation, predominantly an enhanced understanding of the importance of this stage, along with effective integration by emergency management personnel and an improved process, will allow future delivery of best and most timely outcomes for impacted communities.

Resource Provision

Understanding resource requests to support an evacuation or an evacuated community is critical. Agencies need to provide timely information on resource availability to the IMT, as this has a direct impact on evacuation planning and implementation.

TOP TIPS (FROM THOSE DIRECTLY INVOLVED) ...

For those involved in formal evacuations, in the line of control or as a member of an EMT in the future, you may find the following comments from those directly involved in the evacuation process of communities within the Grampians beneficial:

- Delegate and use Deputies for critical functions.
- Ensure agencies are integrated and give focus to the "Return" stage for impacted communities.
- Be forward looking, stay calm and steer the team's direction.
- Communicate assertively but respect your team.
- Have the confidence to negotiate underlying politics and remove blockages.
- You must be willing to accept some risk in an informed and outcome focussed manner.
- You have to trust the Incident Controller's decision making.
- Don't jump at shadows.
- Be honest with the community.
- Get yourself an Executive Assistant or scribe.
- Be prepared ... it is not solely an emergency response matter, IT IS emergency management.
- Use people at community meetings who know the community and the area well.
- Be prepared to be exhausted at the end, and accept that's ok.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

After reading this case study, consider what actions you would take if confronted with a similar incident. Also consider the following questions – perhaps discuss them with your colleagues:

- Do you understand the current evacuation arrangements?
- Do you have a sound knowledge of SOP J03.12 *Evacuation During Bushfires*?
- Do you understand the various options available to protect the community in situations such as the evacuation reviewed in this **Case Study**, including:
 - ◇ moving people from one side of the road to other to reduce their risk, especially in urban areas;
 - ◇ partial evacuation;
 - ◇ sheltering in place; and
 - ◇ the use of Bushfire Neighbourhood Safer Places?
- Do you have a sound knowledge of our current predictive tools and information gathering systems? Do you understand how predictive services can assist you?
- Have you considered the agencies you need to involve within an IMT and EMT for an evacuation to be successful?
- Do you understand the range of options available to provide information to the community?
- Have you considered the challenges you may be presented with in order to return an affected community and how this can be best achieved?

IN CONCLUSION:

Evacuation is just one way of protecting the community during bushfire. The learnings from the 2013/14 FDP have assisted to prepare fire and emergency management agencies for future recommendations to evacuate.

The practical application of existing arrangements has shown the withdrawal stage requires significant planning, time and resources to achieve effectively. However, the return stage has been identified by those people involved during this summer as presenting equal or greater challenges for IMTs, EMTs and relief/recovery agencies. This important aspect of evacuation needs at least equal planning, time and resources to achieve safely and efficiently for the affected community.

The outcome of the Grampians evacuations was a very positive one and it must be recognised this was due to the united approach taken by fire and emergency management agencies working with a community well rehearsed and prepared for bushfire.

The organisations involved in the development and review of this Case Study acknowledge the assistance of their members (volunteer and staff).

This publication may be of assistance to you but the state of Victoria and its employees do not guarantee the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss, or consequence which may arise from you relying on any information contained within. ©Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) - This publication is copyright. No part may be reproduced by any process except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 - July 2014.