



VICTORIA POLICE

Stewarton Fire Review

December 2014

Community Report

January 2015



Contents

Introduction	1
Purpose	1
Objectives.....	1
Victoria’s approach to continuous improvement	1
Operational context.....	4
Readiness.....	4
Fire activity	5
Review process	7
Community meetings	7
Interviews.....	8
Summary of community feedback	10
Evacuation	10
Community engagement	13
Communications	14
Planning and preparedness/shared responsibility.....	17
Traffic management	18
Conclusion	19
Appendices.....	20
Appendix 1 – Ignitions from lightning on 16 December 2014.....	20
Appendix 2 – Fire Danger Rating Report	21
Appendix 3 – Technical and operational observations.....	22

Introduction

December 2014 saw a significant storm event and subsequent fire activity occur across the Hume region of Victoria.

This Community Report relates to the review of the Stewarton Fire and its impact on the communities of Goorambat, Goomalibee and Stewarton.

The Stewarton Fire occurred on the 16th of December 2014, as the last of a series of fires that occurred across the Hume Region, following a significant lightning event. The fire was aggressive, moving quickly through the rural landscape around the communities of Stewarton, Goomalibee and Goorambat. In a short period, the fire threatened houses and affected considerable land holdings, stock and fences. While no houses were destroyed nor damaged, 31 properties were impacted by the fire, 2 hay sheds destroyed, and approximately 2606 hectares (ha) burnt.

Purpose

A review of the Stewarton Fire was initiated at the request of Emergency Management Commissioner, following feedback provided to the Minister for Emergency Services at a meeting with local residents. The Hume Region Emergency Management Inspector (REMI) of Victoria Police was tasked with conducting the review, with support from Country Fire Authority (CFA).

Objectives

The broad objectives of the review are to:

- Engage the community, agencies and affected persons to understand the community concerns in relation to planning, response and recovery to the Stewarton Fire
- Provide a level of clarification and explanation to the affected community
- Identify and report on lessons learnt and areas for improvement.

Victoria's approach to continuous improvement

Each year, the Victorian emergency management sector undertakes review and evaluation activities to better inform emergency management planning and improvement. There is a particular focus to identify any issues experienced operationally and within the community relating to the emergency response.

In line with arrangements introduced in July 2014 under the Emergency Management Act 2013, Victoria has adopted a new approach to learning and improvement. This continuous improvement approach supports the emergency management sector's shared goal of creating a sustainable and efficient emergency management system that reduces the likelihood, effect and consequences of emergencies.

Consistent with national and international lessons management principles, the Victorian sector focuses on identifying best practice and opportunities for improvement. These lessons and actions are then incorporated into emergency management activities across the sector.

A two-year improvement cycle provides a consistent, transparent and flexible approach to identifying and learning lessons to create real and lasting cultural and behavioural change.

The outputs of this approach are designed to address and improve processes, procedures and performance. EMV facilitates this process in conjunction with, and on behalf of, Victoria's emergency management sector through the State Review Team.

The observations collected from the community in relation to the Stewarton Fire, as described in this Community Report, will be combined with other information from various sources to provide broader insights into operational practice and community impacts. In this respect, it is noted that significant work is already underway in a number of areas that are also identified by other Community Reports, such as:

- [Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire – Community Report \(January to March 2014\)](#)
- [Mount Ray-Boundary Track Fire – Community Report \(January to March 2014\)](#)
- [Lancefield-Cobaw Fire – Community Report \(October 2015\)](#).

Additionally, since the Stewarton Fire, priority areas for improvement have been identified and actioned in the emergency management sector more broadly. The following publications set out a number of important initiatives that respond to many of the issues raised in this report:

- [Strategic Priorities for Emergency Management Volunteering in Victoria \(October 2015\)](#)
- [Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015](#)
- [Emergency Management Operational Communications Program \(November 2015\)](#)
- [Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015 – 2018](#)
- [IGEM Monitoring and Assurance Framework for Emergency Management \(2015\)](#).

Trends and lessons across multiple emergencies, including the Stewarton Fire, will continue be identified. These trends and insights will be used to determine required actions, influence training, guide planning processes and develop learning products to share the experience with others.

Operational context

Over a short period on the 15th and 16th of December 2014, some 52,000 lightning strikes¹ were recorded in the region, resulting in approximately 250 fire ignitions.

In the afternoon when the Stewarton Fire broke out, emergency services were already responding to three large-scale going fires in Wodonga West, Creighton's Creek and Lake Rowan. All of these were a result of lightning strikes. Each fire had potential to cause significant damage if uncontrolled. To further exacerbate the situation, there were numerous smaller fires burning, crossing multiple municipal boundaries.

Ultimately, there was significant demand placed on resources and the community. This level of demand also tested the capacity of the responding agencies, in particular the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

Readiness

The 15th of December 2014 (the day prior to the Stewarton Fire) was not a day of official readiness as required by the public Fire Danger Ratings² (FDRs), although the agencies in the Hume Region were responding to incidents arising from multiple lightning strikes occurring over the latter part of that day. A Severe Weather Warning had been issued, although it had not predicted lightning strikes of such intensity.

There were significant ignitions arising from the lightning events during the afternoon and evening of the 15th of December. At 2.35pm, the Wodonga West fire started between Barnawartha and Wodonga and pushed towards an urban growth area. Resource allocation to this fire included tankers and air support, including the Large Air Tanker (retardant loaded air support unit).

The 16th of December 2014 (the day of the Stewarton Fire) presented an escalated level of readiness, with the weather conditions and predicted FDRs changing over the preceding 24-hour period. The fire danger was assessed as being between Severe and Extreme, depending on the locality within Hume.

Given the events of the 15th of December and with the Wodonga West Fire threatening nearby communities, all nine Incident Control Centres (ICCs) across the Hume Region had incident management personnel positioned in readiness on 16th of December. External and supporting agency readiness was consistent with the Hume Region Emergency Management Team Readiness Matrix.

¹ See [Appendix 1](#) for a map of ignitions from lightning

² See [Appendix 2](#)

Fire activity

Whilst the review is centred on the Stewarton Fire, it is important to understand the scope of fires across the Hume Region on 16th of December 2014 and the impact on demand for available resources.

As mentioned, 52,000 lightning strikes were recorded over the period directly preceding the morning of the 16th December 2014. An early morning reconnaissance flight had located increased fire activity across the region, which was later estimated by CFA as more than 250 fire ignitions. Up until 5.00pm on the 16th of December, the majority of resources were allocated to the Wodonga West, Creighton's Creek and Lake Rowan Fires.

Wodonga West

Although not a particularly large fire at 130 ha, the Wodonga West Fire had consumed significant resource capacity. The attention to this fire was due mostly because of its proximity to urban growth area, but also because it was the first major fire identified. The Wodonga West Fire was managed by a Level 3 multi-agency incident management team from the Wodonga ICC.

Creighton's Creek

The Creighton's Creek Fire commenced at approximately 3.16pm from a lightning strike. At 5,742 ha, it was a significant fire that was threatening nearby properties, including a prominent horse stud. This fire was drawing on the resource capacity of the area, although given its distance from the Wodonga West, resource allocation was shared without significant issue. The Creighton's Creek Fire was managed by a Level 3 multi-agency incident management team from the Shepparton ICC.

Lake Rowan

The Lake Rowan Fire commenced at approximately 3.51pm from a lightning strike, and rapidly escalated to 5,058 ha. This fire threatened stock, rural farm infrastructure and residential dwellings, placing more pressure on resources that were shared across the region. The Lake Rowan Fire was managed by a Level 2 multi-agency incident management team from the Wangaratta ICC.

Whilst the above fires were the most significant, other ignitions were also drawing resources, such as the Lurg, Molyullah and Cosgrove fires.

Stewarton

Resulting from a lightning strike, the Stewarton Fire was reported at approximately 5.13pm in the vicinity of Ballantine's Road. The fire grew quickly and ultimately reached over 2600 ha before it was brought under control.

As with the Lake Rowan and Creighton's Creek fires, rural infrastructure and livestock were impacted. Resource capacity was restricted due to the nearby Lake Rowan Fire and other fires occurring in the immediate area.

The Stewarton Fire was managed at the local level before escalating to a Level 2 multi-agency incident management team at the Wangaratta ICC, which was later escalated to Level 3.

Summary of fire impact

- Stewarton (Shire of Benalla)**
 There were no houses destroyed nor damaged. 31 properties were impacted by fire, 2 hay sheds destroyed, and approximately 2606 hectares (ha) burnt.
- Lake Rowan (Shires of Benalla, Wangaratta and Moira):**
 One house was destroyed (unoccupied). 61 properties were affected, 5 outbuildings destroyed, and approximately 5,058 ha burnt.
- Creighton and Longwood (Shire of Strathbogie)**
 Four houses were destroyed (2 unoccupied). 74 properties were affected, 9 out buildings destroyed, and approximately 5742 ha burnt.

Combined losses for all fires included:

- More than 3,000 sheep and 300 cattle killed, euthanised or sent to salvage slaughter (affecting approximately 140 landholders)
- Approximately 511 km of fencing were lost
- Road repairs were required to the Midland Highway between Benalla and Nalinga.

A total of 13,283 ha were burnt, including 550 ha of public land, 7199 ha of pastoral land and 499 ha of crops.

Name	Date & Time Started	Hectares Burnt	Cause
West Wodonga	December 15, 2014 (1435 Hrs)	130	Lightning
Creighton's Creek (near Euroa)	December 16, 2014 (1516 Hrs)	5,742	Lightning
Lake Rowan- Warby Ranges (near Wangaratta)	December 16, 2014 (1551 Hrs)	5,085	Lightning
Stewarton (near Benalla)	December 16, 2014 (1713 Hrs)	2,606	Lightning

Review process

This review commenced in February 2015, with the engagement of the community, local government, the Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning (DELWP), VicRoads, CFA, Victoria Police and other emergency services.

The process of consultation included the following activities:

- Meet with directly affected and concerned community members to understand their viewpoint
- From the meetings, collate information, identify relevant agencies, allocate themed categories and prepare questions identified within initial interviews for agency response
- Consult, appraise and update agency representatives with the information gathered and allow time to research and understand individual agency actions
- From the identified community and agency representative themes, conduct a closed meeting to allow direct interaction and consultation between community and agencies
- Conduct a follow-up community meeting to allow full and frank discussion, with questions and answers between community and agency representatives
- Follow up with 'line of control' and support agency interviews
- Prepare final report.

Community meetings

Two community meetings were conducted, with the first between agency representatives and an identified 'group of ten', and then a subsequent public meeting.

Community Meeting - March 30th 2015

The March 2015 community meeting was held in the local area at the Goorambat Hall. Agencies in attendance were CFA, DELWP, Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR), Victoria Police, VicRoads, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and local government.

The meeting provided an overview of the December 15 – 16 fire activity, to set the scene and identify to all the magnitude of the response.

Following the presentation, individual agency representatives addressed the group, followed by agency Q & A.

The issues raised in the meeting were consistent with interviews. Recurring issues were the release of the tankers from nearby fires in the initial response period,

control of the incident, and confusion over the roadside management of the Midland Highway.

It was also noted that those who acted in a response, control or command activity had done so with the best of intentions. Given the demands on resources, attendees expressed gratitude that there was no loss of houses or life in the Stewarton Fire.

Community Meeting - April 13th 2015

The intention of the second meeting was to 'open the door' to all community members affected by the Stewarton Fire and allow the same opportunity to engage agency representatives as provided to the 'group of ten'.

Fourteen community members attended this meeting. Additional interested parties included local media, a Lake Rowan resident and State Review Team members.

As with the first meeting, an overview of the December 15 – 16 fire activity was provided. Agency representatives then addressed questions as they arose from the community members present.

A number of themes consistent with the first meeting were raised and responded to. Additional issues included:

- Possible replication of the Stewarton Review into other areas (such as Lake Rowan)
- The use of private firefighting equipment
- Care of roadside vegetation, including historical trees
- Water supply – follow up with water authorities to explore filling points/tanks as there are grants available that could be utilised.

Interviews

Ten CFA volunteers were interviewed and their input, alongside the community meetings, form part of the Summary of Community Feedback that follows.

Following these interviews, issues were identified and categorised into themes and allocated against relevant agencies for follow up. Meetings were then held with agency representatives where they were briefed on the interview findings and provided, where applicable, likely and relevant questions to be addressed.

Following the agency meetings, written responses were provided by CFA and DELWP.

Matters arising from these interviews (and the review more broadly) relating to technical, operational or internal agency issues are discussed in [Appendix 3 – Technical and operational observations](#).

As with the recommendations discussed in this report, a number of the technical and operational observations contained in Appendix 3 have already been identified for action as part of other Community Reports and emergency management publications since the Stewarton Fire.

Summary of community feedback

Consultation with the local community identified a number of areas for potential improvement. These areas align with the following Emergency Management Victoria themes, and are also broadly consistent with themes raised in other recent EMV Community Reports undertaken in Victoria:

- Evacuation
- Community engagement³
- Communication between responder agencies
- Planning and preparedness/shared responsibility⁴
- Traffic management.

Related to these themes, a number of recommendations have been made for further action.

Evacuation

The first unit responding to the Stewarton Fire was the Stewarton Tanker. From the recordings of radio communications, there is evidence of the crew relating the status of the fire as 'out of control'. Approximately two minutes later, they communicate to dispatch (via radio communications managed by Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority, ESTA):

"This fire is out of control – it's probably burnt approximately 20 hectares now and its burning quite furiously. We want the Midland Highway closed, there's lots of traffic and it's close to the Midland Highway. We need police and we need houses here evacuated."

The above comment was supported via a communications task issued from ESTA dispatch to a Mobile Data Terminal (MDT) of the police operational response crew.

There is no evidence of ESTA dispatch verbally communicating or prioritising the task over radio and it appears the request by Stewarton Tanker was lost in the running dialogue and reportedly not seen on the MDT screen. The only action was a response to traffic management.

When listening to the radio communications recording, there is obvious concern expressed from the Stewarton Tanker crew and this should have been identified.

³ It is noted that with respect to the recommendation arising from this theme, work is underway as a consequence of the Community Report into the Lancefield-Cobaw Fire of October 2015 and the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

⁴ As above

The evidence and interviews suggest that ESTA dispatchers and Police receiving this request have not adequately assessed, prioritised and communicated the information supplied.

Despite the above communication from the Stewarton Tanker, there was no other call for evacuation. In the consultation, there was a general feeling in the community that evacuation should not have been requested, as the community had gathered in what they felt was a safe location. Nonetheless, it was recognised that the request was motivated by concern for community safety.

There is no evidence to suggest that others considered the need for evacuation until well into the fire response and after a change of control level at the Local Command Facility (LCF). There is evidence of a Municipal Emergency Response Coordinator (MERC) inquiry as to the need for evacuation, but no formal advice or action to evacuate was received.

The Police Commander was later noted to be making early preparations for the notification and potential evacuation of a major business near the fire front. Also noted was the nomination as the Goorambat Oval as a 'safe place' for residents to attend. Goorambat Oval is not officially a 'Neighbourhood Safer Place' and the nomination caused a level of concern for some, with police sending a vehicle to understand and gain further information on the location and any potential threat.

A number of people consulted raised reference to a reported incident of a person seen running into a dam to escape the fire, with potentially fatal consequences. This information was available to a number of people involved in the line of control, although there is no evidence of a formal evacuation being considered as a consequence.

It should be noted that police were instructed not to enter the fire ground due to safety issues, although police had traffic control operating around the fire ground.

It is apparent the evacuation request by the Stewarton Tanker was either lost on those that heard it, or was not picked up or actioned by those in the line of control or command, including operational police that were dispatched the task via the communication network. The consideration for evacuation was not identified as a priority, even with police operating within the LCF.

Whilst there were no lives lost during the Stewarton Fire, the lack of priority applied to the need for evacuation, across both command and control, was an area of concern.

Given the rapid, volatile, unpredictable and intense nature of the Stewarton Fire, it is considered that the actions of the local brigade, field crews, self-initiating private

appliances and local community is what prevented serious injury and the loss of life during this incident.

Recommendations:

1. That Victoria Police, in collaboration with CFA and ESTA, capture and share the circumstances of this incident to increase knowledge and understanding of local evacuation management in an emergency response.
2. That Victoria Police review the process for escalation of 'priority status' communications during an emergency response, particularly where evacuation is required.

Community engagement

It is clear that the community have a strong desire and need for information during major incidents. But the consultation demonstrated that there is also a need for ongoing engagement after the fire has been brought under control.

Some in the community (including CFA volunteers) communicated disappointment with post-fire engagement. Many had had strong thoughts and opinions about what had happened and felt they have been left out and not consulted. Among volunteers, some expressed concern about the tireless hours of activity during the response and the level of disconnect from family during this period.

It was evident to the review that the community wanted to be heard and listened to. Community meetings and debriefs did not appear to meet this need.

Similarly, there was no apparent system of post incident personal engagement or CFA debriefing that addressed volunteer concerns specifically. There were numerous references to the debrief and community meetings being too broad. A similar feeling was reportedly expressed at a community recovery day held for the combined Stewarton and Lake Rowan communities, some seven months after the fire.

The issue of post-fire engagement weighed on the minds of volunteers and lends itself as an opportunity for CFA and the emergency management sector to recognise and build a process where post-incident engagement is more effective.

Recommendation:

3. That EMV, in collaboration with emergency management organisations, examine how to improve processes of community engagement after an emergency has occurred.⁵

⁵ It is noted that work is underway in this area as a consequence of the Community Report into the Lancefield-Cobaw Fire of October 2015 and the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

Communications

Whilst the Stewarton Fire was a relatively short event from start to finish, communication problems were encountered throughout the incident. Communication was a concern during response and well into recovery for agencies and community alike.

Emergency services communication

It was felt that communication systems, processes and follow up did not operate in a timely or efficient manner to allow agency personnel, affected residents and the general community to understand and act as effectively and safely as possible.

It is noted that overall situational awareness was difficult given the multi-fire response across the entire region. The difficulty of communication through the mixed lines of control and command was highlighted as a concern. As a consequence, there were difficulties in requests for resources, cross-district border awareness and allocation of resources.

CFA members felt they were adversely affected by limited communication, with reliance on CFA's pager system. In the absence of this, they relied on other volunteers or the local community for up to date messaging.

“Decisions made are balanced on what comes out on a pager. There was no message on the pager regarding units available or what needed to be done. There is more on the fire app ... there is a lack of information to us. It (information) would allow us to protect our properties.”

(Rural CFA member)

The frustration was such that there was talk of mass exodus from CFA, raised during one-on-one interviews and the community forums. It is apparent that many rural members maintain a level of firefighting equipment for protection of private property. There was a feeling from some that they were better served self-activating as they could work together and were not hindered or obstructed by what some described as lack of leadership or authority to make decisions.

“We can do a better job on our own co-ordinating a response than what we do by being told.”

(CFA volunteer)

“The resources initially did a good job in what they did but I think they could have stopped the fire, but they seemed to be on asset protection, not to stop the fire. Why can't people make decisions? Who is telling them what to do?”

(CFA volunteer)

The consultations suggested the radio communication channels were 'clogged' and appear to have been overwhelmed by the influx of calls and requests. There were a

number of resource requests where the result was uncertain. This is not to suggest they were not actioned, but that ESTA dispatch was so busy it was difficult for crews, who were faced with dangerous and dynamic fire, to concentrate or follow up on responses.

Some outlined the 'great job' ESTA dispatch did considering the level of activity on the day. Multiple radio channels were in use, with mobile phones and SMS also used as a method of communication.

"We were trying to call Vic Fire [call sign for ESTA dispatch] but couldn't get through. I wanted to let them know that I wanted to set up a control point."
(CFA volunteer)

"Tankers were coming in but we didn't know who or where they were or where they were going."
(CFA volunteer)

Radio communications recordings on the day demonstrate an overwhelming number of units using the common operating channel. Confusion and frustration is evident as different units struggled to gain airtime. The previously mentioned request from the Stewarton Tanker for an evacuation is an example of where the communication system failed to respond adequately and to the expectations of those requiring it most.

Other agency communication

The issue of communication extends to other agencies and was highlighted as an issue between the Victoria Police, DELWP and VicRoads. Victoria Police expressed some concern related to availability of information to communicate or develop evacuation and/or traffic management plans (although the latter seems to have been received relatively well).

DELWP raised concerns with respect to use of CFA radio channels although, despite some initial confusion, this appears to have been worked through without major issue.

The community raised VicRoads management of the Midland Highway as a concern. Limited communication from VicRoads to concerned residents only frustrated and increased anxiety of those affected.

There were questions as to what information was available with respect to roads and how that information was released and updated to affected and relevant communities, such as updated information with respect to road openings and clearing of burning and fallen debris.

There was a feeling that VicRoads were not engaged or in a position to understand local effect of road management. For example, incidents were highlighted of roads being re-opened where fences were yet to be repaired, resulting in stock wandering and causing risk to public road users.

The VicRoads public information call centres were not received positively, with examples of calls going without action for some time. It was acknowledged by VicRoads that while the call centres were functioning, they did not represent the most practical approach to addressing community concerns.

Recommendation:

4. That CFA, in collaboration with other responder agencies, examine how voice-based communication channels are used during emergencies to improve accessibility, increase effectiveness and ensure radio communications support operational needs.⁶

⁶ It is noted that some work in this area may be underway as a consequence of the Emergency Management Operational Communications Program 2015

Planning and preparedness/shared responsibility

The impact of burning and fire affected trees along the Midland Highway was a point that caused frustration and angst with community. Fire continued to burn along stretches of the highway for extended periods, resulting in ongoing calls for assistance from passing public.

There was discussion about one farmer's calls to VicRoads for assistance going unanswered for extended periods and also CFA volunteers responding to over 48 calls for assistance in the recovery period (when already extremely fatigued from the previous response period). This raised the question of control and where it sat after the major fire impact.

Whilst the control agency remained in place, there was confusion as to responsibility with respect to clearing, felling and removal of burning trees. This point was further exacerbated by the reopening of the Midland Highway and transfer of management back to VicRoads. This issue was strongly discussed at the community meetings where, even with all relevant agency representatives present, a conclusion was not reached.

These conversations gave rise to discussion of the ongoing management of roadsides and the risks presented by dangerous trees and overgrown vegetation that was thought to increase fire risk and intensity. However, it is noted that the issue of roadside management is not unique to the Stewarton Fire.

Recommendation:

5. EMV, in collaboration with emergency management organisations, review and determine how to support better management of roadside vegetation before, during and after an emergency response.⁷

⁷ It is noted that work is underway in this area as a consequence of the Community Report into the Lancefield-Cobaw Fire of October 2015

Traffic management

Related to the issue of evacuation, traffic management points were in operation and effect during the Stewarton Fire response.

The interviews conducted note that traffic management was considered and actioned early by responder agencies and Victoria Police. Importantly, traffic management points were established in a timely manner and with consideration of the fire movement and threat.

Some points of concern were raised with respect to traffic (vehicular) movement within the fire ground area due to arterial road network penetration in the early response period. Given the early dynamics, this may have been hard to avoid.

Traffic management points also attracted a level of concern as those attempting to enter the area for stock assessment and movement were blocked or prevented access. Such events occurred because of lack of communication and awareness rather than planning, and were soon overcome without incident. There were also some issues raised with respect to relief crews having a different approach to local police. Again, these matters were worked through and overcome.

Traffic management appears, in the main, to have been effective⁸ and to have demonstrated a good level of consideration and determination to work rapidly through issues as they arose.

⁸ See also 'Communication' and 'Traffic Management' (discussed in Appendix 3)

Conclusion

The Stewarton Fire tested the capacity and capability of response agencies and the resilience of the local community.

In this report, there are genuine concerns raised by the community on a range of issues. Nonetheless, the commitment and sacrifice of volunteers and the emergency services is be admired and congratulated. Importantly, while infrastructure, crops and stock were lost, lives and homes were spared in the Stewarton area (Shire of Benalla).

There were challenges hindering the fire response and recovery, and there are clear opportunities for improvement that have been identified in this report.

In addition to the issues described in this report, observations from the community in relation to the Stewarton Fire will be collated with trends from other emergencies to inform an ongoing continuous improvement cycle. In many cases, observations in this report relate to an ongoing area of work where they will be used to inform future developments and planned actions.

There is a clear opportunity to learn how we can effectively capture community observations and maintain meaningful dialogue with community members before, during and after emergencies.

The process taken to examine this incident and engage the community has enabled issues to be discussed and questions to be explored. This Community Report represents the sector's ongoing commitment to sharing, exploring and addressing these community observations.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ignitions from lightning on 16 December 2014

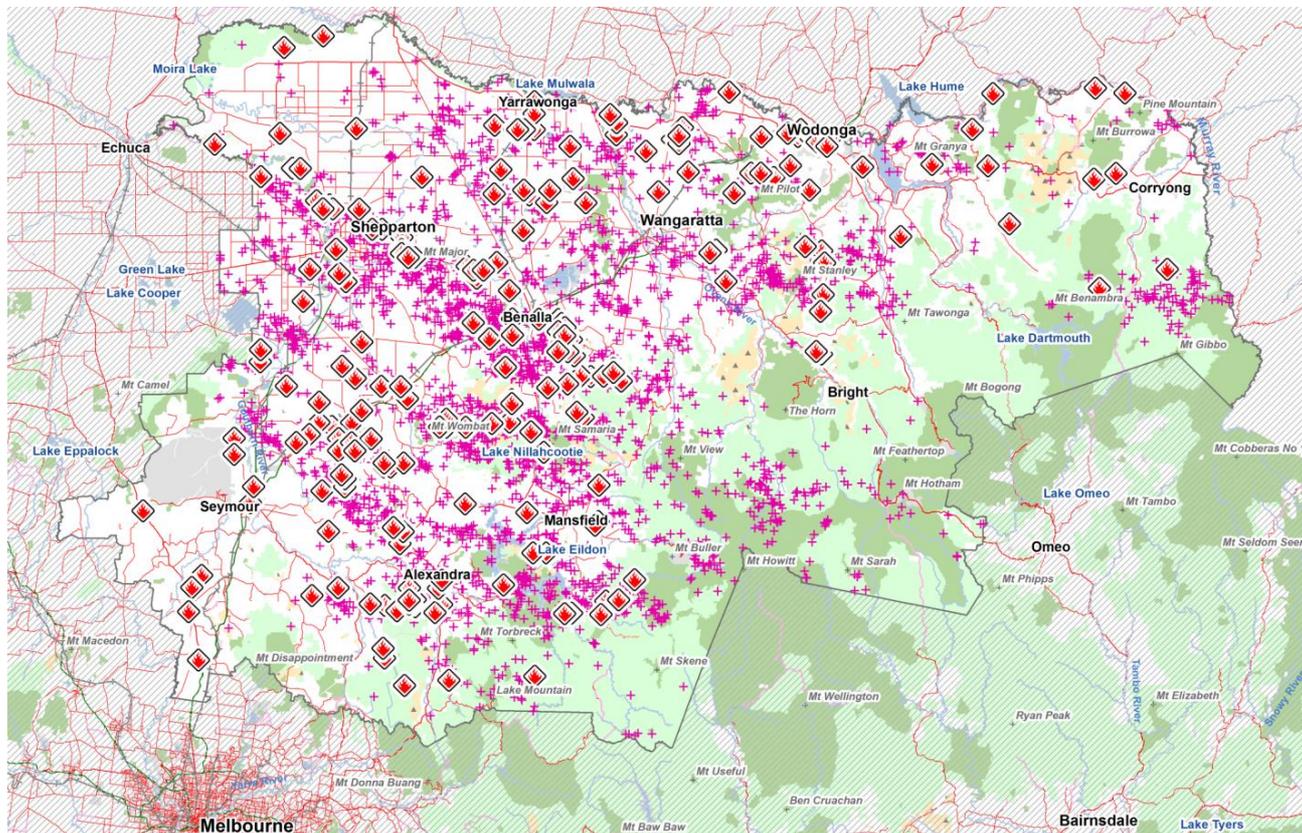
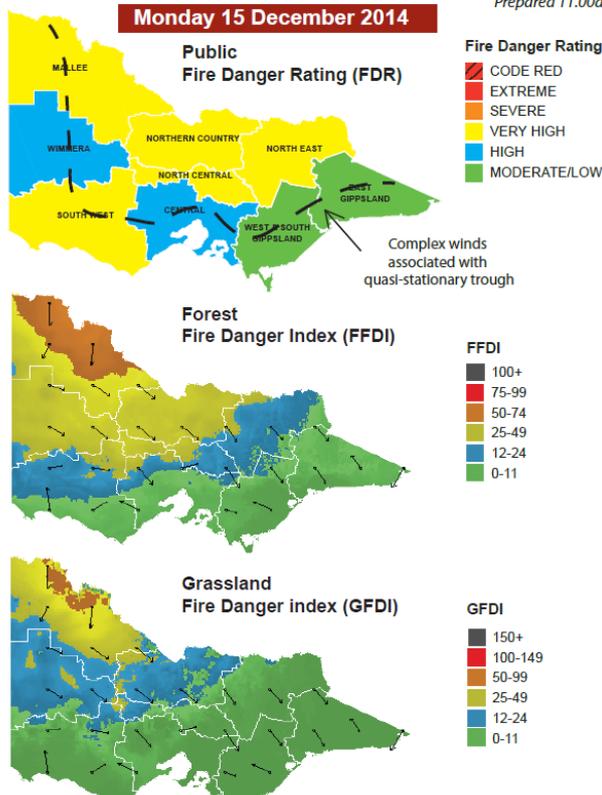


Image shows lightning strikes (pink crosses) and reported fire starts (red fire symbols)

Appendix 2 – Fire Danger Rating Report

SCC FIRE WEATHER INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Prepared 11.00am 15 December 2014



Fire Danger

Max temps reaching 33-38°C inland and 25-30°C in the south. Afternoon RH grading from 10-20% inland to 40-50% south of the trough. Moderate N-NW winds tending S-SE in the south. C-Haines locally reaching 11 inland.

Lightning potential

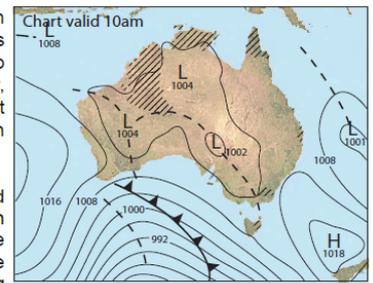
Chance of isolated thunderstorms [mainly dry] near the trough and also about the central and eastern ranges. High based [dry] thunderstorms possible further inland and in the west.

Precipitation forecast

Showers and isolated thunderstorms with localised falls typically in the range 2-5mm. Locally higher falls 10mm+ with thunderstorms in the east.

Synoptic pattern and forecast

A surface low pressure trough over South Australia is expected to extend into western districts on Monday, while a stronger cold front crossing the Southern Ocean approaches Victoria.



Isolated showers and thunderstorms developing in the north and east during the afternoon, mainly about the eastern ranges then extending southwards over central Victoria this evening. Fine over the far west and southwest. A generally warm to hot day inland with light winds tending moderate to fresh northwesterly. Milder near the coast with light to moderate south to southeasterly winds.

This weather briefing package is prepared by the meteorologist in the State Control Centre to assist fire agencies with preparation of fire danger ratings. Without permission.



Image shows operational fire weather intelligence product, including public fire danger ratings for Monday 15 December 2014 by forecast weather district

Appendix 3 – Technical and operational observations

The following discussion and related observations arise from the review, with a particular focus on the result of consultations with operational personnel. As a consequence, most of the matters raised in this Appendix 3 concern internal agency and operational matters. It is important to note that many of the observations have already been identified and actioned in the following Community Reports and publications:

- [Lancefield-Cobaw Fire –Community Report \(October 2015\)](#)
- [Goongerah-Deddick Trail Fire – Community Report \(January to March 2014\)](#)
- [Mount Ray-Boundary Track Fire – Community Report \(January to March 2014\)](#)
- [Strategic Priorities for Emergency Management Volunteering in Victoria \(October 2015\)](#)
- [Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015](#)
- [Emergency Management Operational Communications Program \(November 2015\)](#)
- [Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015 – 2018](#)
- [IGEM Monitoring and Assurance Framework for Emergency Management \(2015\)](#).

Consultation highlighted a number of observations that may be areas of further improvement. These observations align with the following Emergency Management Victoria themes, and are also broadly consistent with themes raised other recent Community Reports undertaken in Victoria:

- Evacuation
- Incident Response
- Community engagement
- Volunteer engagement
- Communications
- Planning and preparedness/shared responsibility
- Traffic management
- Emergency management teams
- Local knowledge
- Public information.

It should be noted that the observations sometimes traverse a number of themes.

Community and Volunteer engagement

The review noted discussion of the Rostered Duty Officer (RDO) role within the CFA. This position was used as point of communication for decision-making and authority well into the fire response, including the period it was threatening property and persons.

The information obtained throughout this review demonstrates that personnel at the Local Command Facility (LCF) were communicating direct with the RDO and taking relevant advice. There is also evidence suggesting that the command and communication lines were inconsistent within control lines.

It is clear that not everyone operating from field to incident was aware of the command and control lines. More than likely, this may have added to some confusion and frustration, but most notably it inhibited all information transferring direct to the Incident Controller (IC) in place at Wangaratta.

The lines between command and control are sometimes difficult to understand, even for those with significant experience. Typically, a Brigade Captain accepts command of personnel and control of the response pending the escalation of control. This process can be repeated until the formal control lines are reached within the ICC environment.

Apparent during the review are the different levels, experience and interpretation of command and control by volunteers. There were numerous comments about confusion as to who had control, command and coordination of the response.

The review notes the internal practices and policy of CFA, with respect to Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) 8.04, and in particular 1.4, that allow for and demonstrate the active involvement of the RDO in decision-making, response and transfer of fires. Also noted is Joint Standard Operating Procedure (JSOP) 3.14 and 3.15 and reference to involvement of command lines at section 8 in both documents.

There is sufficient reference within the SOPs to expect that the IC should have been made aware of the circumstances of Stewarton Fire, to allow early consideration of transfer of control.

“The night of the fire it was a hell of a job – couldn’t have done much better. The structure worked but post the initial response there was nothing, no contact, no direction. Just not good enough, they (CFA) should appoint someone to take control.”

(Rural CFA Captain)

Also, the reception to CFA command attendance at debriefs and community meetings was mixed, with some suggesting it was positive and others indicating they felt they were not heard.

There was also a sense of disconnect reported between full-time CFA members and volunteers in rural locations. One volunteer said he had not seen a uniformed officer or spoke to one throughout the fire response (during or after). There was a general feeling of lack of engagement and follow up with CFA volunteers, which lead one to say:

“CFA needs to improve communications and the way it treats volunteers or it will lose control of volunteers on the fire ground or worse, (they will) walk away from the CFA.”

(CFA volunteer)

It was apparent that many community units responded without appropriate command or control arrangements. The general feeling was these members felt they could be more productive self-deploying, rather than joining a tanker team.

The review also noted a repeated reference to the CFA command and treatment of volunteers, which seemed to vary according to where the volunteers were based (i.e. higher density areas versus those in remote rural areas).

Observations:

1. The Victorian emergency management sector develops a strategy to improve community engagement during and after an emergency. The strategy should detail how a community, including CFA members, are engaged, understood and how follow up action is to be communicated.⁹
2. CFA engage with rural members to understand and act on the feelings of remote rural volunteers, to ensure continued engagement of rural communities to CFA.¹⁰

⁹ It is noted that work is already underway in this area as a consequence of the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

¹⁰ It is noted that work is already underway in this area as a part of the Strategic Priorities for Emergency Management Volunteering in Victoria (October 2015)

Incident response and Evacuation

The Wangaratta ICC's footprint includes most of Benalla and the Rural City of Wangaratta, and only small sections of Mansfield, Moira, Wodonga and Alpine local government areas, dividing over two policing commands of Goulburn Valley and North East.

Initially, a Level 3 Incident Controller managed the Incident Management Team at the Wangaratta ICC, until that person was released to assist the Incident Management Team at the Wodonga West Fire. A Level 2 Incident Controller subsequently management the Incident Management Team at the Wangaratta ICC.

The Incident Management Team positioned at the Wangaratta ICC maintained a watching brief, without exercising control, over a number of fires burning within the response footprint leading up to the Lake Rowan fire start at 1551 hours. Lake Rowan was a significant fire that quickly drew on all available resources, as it spread rapidly and threatened persons and property.

Given the number of fires, the risk exposed and the resource drain, any subsequent fire was bound to test resources and risk issues of fatigue. The Stewarton Fire was communicated via the CFA pager at around 1715 hours.

The 16th of December was a day that tested the capacity and capability of first responders. Equally it tested and identified weakness in the Incident Control Centres, given an ICC typically provides a single incident management process.

On this day there were multiple fires burning within the ICC footprint and two of those fires were Class 1 emergencies within the definition of the Emergency Management Act 2013. It is recognised that the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) is scalable and adaptable to the circumstances, but the pre-determined planning does not cater for this, nor (it could be argued) does the level of training.

The interviews with line of control all lead to similar comments regarding the capability, capacity and sustainability of ongoing multi-response management from the one ICC. These are all areas to be considered, measured for scalability and improved where required.

'In retrospect, we could have exercised line of control earlier, but believe it wouldn't have changed effect anyway given what we had (Lake Rowan fire).'
(Incident Controller)

Effective control over the Stewarton Fire in the initial response period was affected by the lack of timely, relevant and clearly communicated messages. The review found that the difficulties encountered with communication, across the tiered levels,

and the absence of quick transmission via the control lines affected decision-making and intervention by coordinators.

Observations

3. That EMV and responder agencies examine how multiple concurrent emergencies impact on the application of command and control structures and transfer of control processes.¹¹
4. CFA to strengthen the policy with respect to volunteer fatigue identification, welfare acknowledgement and support during an ongoing emergency response.¹²
5. That EMV assess the capability, capacity and sustainability of a single Incident Management Team to manage multiple incidents and multiple hazards.¹³
6. That Victoria Police and responder agencies improve awareness and understanding of evacuation processes during an emergency through the development of multi-agency exercises.¹⁴
7. That Victoria Police and responder agencies further educate incident management personnel about the use of Deputy Incident Controllers to support evacuation management where required.¹⁵
8. That Victoria Police consider the need for separation of Police Command from Coordination duties during an emergency response and how this applies in any pre-position readiness as determined by JSOP 2.03.

¹¹ This observation is broadly addressed in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014-2015

¹² Specifically addressed in the Strategic Priorities for Emergency Management Volunteering in Victoria 2015 and the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014-2015

¹³ This observation is broadly addressed in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014-2015

¹⁴ Specifically addressed in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014-2015

¹⁵ Current policy allows incident controllers the discretion to appoint deputies for any function they require.

Traffic management and Emergency Management Teams

Roads

In consultations, signage was noted as a key to keeping people informed as to road, fire and safety conditions. Local residents felt that signage was inappropriate and failed to appropriately inform the public, resulting in ongoing notifications to ESTA dispatch and subsequent turn out of CFA volunteers.

The limited signage and (what was felt by some) as a lack of engagement with local volunteers, saw heavy vehicle movement restricted and sometimes blocked. Further, movement within the fire-affected area was not adequately restricted, allowing public to gain access to major arterials and local roads where the risk of wandering stock and burnt vegetation was apparent.

The issue was exacerbated by minimal community engagement by VicRoads and limited information being made available to the community via public media information outlets. VicRoads call centre numbers operated without action or follow up, which only served to frustrate rural residents.

Stock

The Stewarton Fire impacted significantly on rural property and a number of sheep and cattle. There were some issues raised with respect to the process adopted by the Department of Economic Development, Jobs Transport and Resources (DEDJTR, and formerly the Department of Environment and Primary Industries) when engaging rural landowners.

The approach by DEDJTR was to activate rapidly into fire-affected area, identify injured livestock and, where applicable, treat or euthanise stock. Their intention was also to assess affected locations for loss and overall damage.

Examples were provided where assessment of properties was conducted prior to giving attention to injured animals, with assessors arriving in the morning and vets in the afternoon. Whilst this may have been due to the size of the task before them, it was found to be a frustrating issue for some landowners.

“(They) were more concerned about counting loss than treating loss.”

(Rural landowner)

There were also reports of delays in vets and stock trucks accessing or entering into areas due to traffic management restrictions, or an incomplete understanding of road access points in place. The review also noted comments with respect to information available to communities on the functions and activities undertaken by DEDJTR during recovery.

Whilst concerns were raised with the initial engagement by DEDJTR, there were many positives with respect to their actions. When stock management was initiated

it was reportedly done with compassion, respect and concern. This was most appreciated by landowners who were quite vulnerable and focussed on stock management after the fire.

Local government

The Local Government Area of Benalla was the responding council to the Stewarton Fire. Council activity was predominately enacted in the recovery period, although active also in the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) and a relief centre.

Roadside management and the authority and involvement of council were matters of concern. Council's road management highlighted an opportunity for higher-level involvement in Emergency Management Team (EMT) meetings, where traffic management is discussed and considered. This process was complicated by the fact that the control lines were not clear and the EMT was conducted outside the Benalla rural area. Benalla has a partnership with Wangaratta and a cross border representative, but this process was complicated with events of similar nature occurring simultaneously in each municipality.

Relief centre

Reference was also made to the role of the relief centre. During the event, the nominated relief centre was left without power and incapable of running a generator through 3-phase capacity. An alternative venue found was within the MECC environment, and whilst it served its purpose, it was not the best fit.

Forty people presented and ultimately registered to the relief centre. MECC Central was found to be a valuable tool in dealing with the MECC response, although issues encountered with IT and the absence of Register Find Reunite forms complicated the process.

Recovery

Follow-up community meetings organised by the local council were well received, although there were references to a lack of agency engagement. VicRoads was absent, leading to frustration for community members. The combining of Lake Rowan and Stewarton communities into the one meeting was also seen as too broad, with people feeling it was difficult to share personal and specific community issues.

The local council, along with their bordering partner of Wangaratta, maintained a level of contact into communities for some months, interviewing and ultimately preparing and presenting a community testimonial presentation at a Taminick Winery on the 14th of June 2015. This process was well received by the fire-affected community.

DHHS

Recovery will always be important for individuals and communities. The exposure to events and the experience of loss can create long-lasting impacts, which highlights the importance of ongoing support.

The EM Acts, EMMV, State Relief and Recovery Plan and other supporting plans lay out a path for recovery, nominating DHHS as the recovery coordinator responsible. The review sees this as an opportunity to explore the concept of a control agency as a way to support, integrate, activate and be responsible for recovery.

“ I tried to organise a public meeting: Stewarton, Goomalibee and Goorambat, all Captains, VicRoads and council. Was told by Benalla Group to use the chain of command. It went back to Benalla and then nothing happened. Nobody knows what’s going on. How do we keep people informed? Who checks what’s being done if nobody is given responsibility by those in charge.”

(CFA Captain)

Observations:

9. The Department of Economic Development, Jobs Transport and Resources (DEDJTR) at State, Regional and Incident level clarify their role within the respective control teams and level of activation and response protocols during and following an emergency response and recovery period.¹⁶
10. That Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Group (MEMEG) explore how best to ensure effective communication, engagement and connections between local government and other emergency management partners during multiple emergencies that impact multiple local government areas.¹⁷
11. That Benalla Rural City Council via their Municipal Emergency Management Committee (MEMPC) revisit relief centre nomination and capacity, liaison representation into the Emergency Management Team (EMT) function and supporting IT to the Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) and MECC central process.¹⁸
12. That Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Group (MEMEG) work with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Regional co-ordinator to ensure that all agencies are represented during public

¹⁶ Broadly identified in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

¹⁷ Specifically identified in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

¹⁸ Broadly identified in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015

meetings conducted specific to community issues post a major emergency management response.¹⁹

13. That VicRoads review their integration with Incident and Regional Control Centres to ensure they are engaged, informed and linked to relevant agencies to assess the ongoing needs, communication and placement of road management activities before, during and after emergencies.²⁰

¹⁹ Broadly identified in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015 and the Lancefield-Cobaw Fire Community Report (October 2015)

²⁰ Specifically identified in the Emergency Management Operational Review 2014 – 2015 and broadly identified in the Lancefield-Cobaw Fire Community Report (October 2015)

Local knowledge

A number of more general issues were noted throughout interviews and community meetings.

Property management/maintenance

Poor maintenance or inadequately prepared property was raised with respect to its effect on fire movement and intensity. There was reference to historical action by council on grass and fuel management of properties that seems to have faded as an enforcement issue. Equally, this also related to roadside burns and removal of roadside debris to reduce summer fire risk.

Grassfire as opposed to bushfire

The 2014 fire season advertising campaign referred to 'Leave and Live'. There was conjecture raised with respect to this messaging and it being too focussed on bushfire, when grassfire was equally as threatening and dangerous. Some saw an opportunity to explore advertising over the fire period that is specific to grassfire or generic to grass and bushfire readiness.

Water supplies and backfill

Water availability and backfill was a common theme. The Currawa fire response was waiting for quick-fill activation when the Stewarton Fire started and there are numerous references to both CFA and private appliances leaving the firefight to seek water and a quick-fill site. With limited trucks available in the first instance, this was seen a significant issue as it allowed the fire to go unattended whilst trucks travelled and then attended to backfilling of tanks.

Strategy of response

Issues were raised with respect to the approach of CFA during a firefight. A number spoke of their concerns with control and direction to tankers on the fire front. Examples were provided of trucks sitting idle watching the fire burn, or alternatively on asset protection rather than engaging in the firefight.

"Tankers were sitting on road watching fire movement to the north rather than putting out the fire burning to the west. They only assisted when I asked."

"...(a volunteer) questioned a strike team watching the fire from the highway rather than getting into the paddocks to put it out."

(Rural volunteer using private appliance)

Resource capacity and capability:

There were many examples provided of volunteers working excessive hours after only a short break from the previous day. These same volunteers return to normal function and employment immediately after the response period.

On other occasions crews were called repeatedly (up to 48 times) to respond to burning trees.

Capacity needs to be considered with capability. A number of volunteers in the line of control spoke of the need to train and improve awareness of the command and control process. Some found it hard to allocate time for training, and felt that general skills were no longer recognised or sufficient to identify with internal safety or quality assurance guidelines. The review noted the differing opinions between various levels of command, volunteers and permanent staff on this issue.

Observations:

14. That the CFA conduct a review of rural area volunteer capacity and capability that identifies and recognises individual community requirements and concerns.²¹
15. That the CFA in conjunction with local government areas review available water points to obtain additional supply points where needed. Such water points should be mapped and available as reference material to CFA brigades.

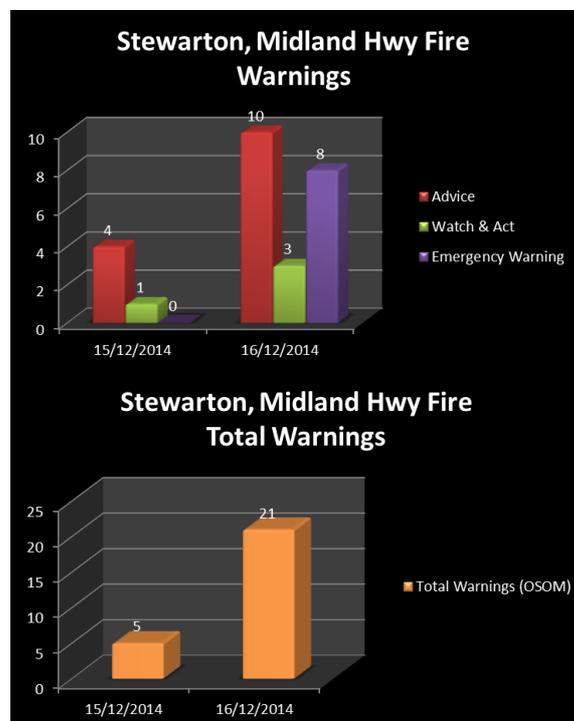
²¹ Specifically addressed in the Victorian Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015 – 2018

Public information

The table below displays the warnings and advice issued across all fires in the region. In the consultation, the timeliness of warnings was questioned, in particular the continuation of warnings after the passing of the fire. It was noted, however, that the general use of warnings and advice has improved.

It was also noted that agencies should be mindful not to replace the need for evacuation with warnings and advice. The two should always work to complement each other, but importantly must always be timely, tailored and targeted, with ongoing assessment as circumstances change.

Warnings & Alerts Report						
Stewarton, Midlands Highway 15-16 December 2014						
Date	Total Warnings (OSOM)	Advice	Watch & Act	Emergency Warning	Date	Total Telephone Alerts (EA)
15/12/2014	5	4	1	0	15/12/2014	0
16/12/2014	21	10	3	8	16/12/2014	3
Totals:	26	14	4	8	Totals:	3



Other opportunities

There was a strong feeling expressed that ongoing reviews, inquiries and commissions can have a negative impact on volunteers. As a community, we expect enormous effort from our volunteers. To expect growth, retain experience and increase skill, there needs to be careful consideration of how volunteers are managed and supported.

It is also acknowledged that this report followed several other recent review and assurance activities for the Hume Region, which created an additional burden on agency personnel.

Observation

16. That EMV establish a tiered process of review that identifies how reviews are activated and scaled according to need.²²

²² Broadly identified in the IGEM Monitoring and Assurance Framework for Emergency Management (2015), but may need further work from EMV.