

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ABOUT FIRE ON PUBLIC LAND

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Abstract

The overall aim of this project was to underpin all aspects of fire management on public land with a sound knowledge of community engagement.

A major component was to define expectations for engaging the public about fire management activities (the standards). A second component was to decide the key performance indicators (KPI's) that could be measured to tell us whether we have been successful or not. These two components form the 'Community Engagement about Fire on Public Land --- A Practical Guide'.

As no community engagement standards existed, a variety of community engagement information was researched. The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) then developed community engagement standards and embedded them within a fire management context, in collaboration with Parks Victoria (PV), Country Fire Authority (CFA), Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Department of Human Services (DHS).

The 'Practical Guide' was released within DSE/PV, and is being implemented across all regions in Victoria in 2006. In addition to the 'Practical Guide', a 'Plan to Improve' has been written to describe the key actions required by DSE and PV to improve the way communities are engaged about fire on public land.

Introduction

Effective management of public land involves a broad range of issues and activities, and it is important that fire is integrated and coordinated within this. Fire is a natural and ever-present risk in the Australian environment and an important management tool for maintaining the health of Victoria's parks and forests.

Managing fire on public land requires partnerships that bring together Victoria's fire and public land services and the communities they serve. In turn, the most effective way of creating, developing and strengthening these partnerships is through community engagement.

Background

This paper outlines work undertaken in Victoria, Australia, where the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is responsible for fire management on public land. DSE's role in managing fire on public land is a vital part of Victoria's fire service, providing specialist forest fire fighting skills to complement the operations of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFESB).

The challenges faced by DSE fire management are complex. Victoria's landscape, vegetation, climate and weather conditions make it one of the most fire-prone areas in the world. About one third of the State is public land, from National Parks to State Parks through to small isolated bush reserves surrounded by private land and metropolitan parks. As fire moves across boundaries (approximately 60,000 kilometres of public-private land boundary) there are many neighbours, stakeholders and interest groups with whom DSE needs to work collaboratively with.

While community engagement is not new to DSE or to Parks Victoria (PV), its importance has been growing. Our experience is showing that better results and a more lasting impact comes from involving local people in the planning and decision-making that affects their community.

We also know that when it comes to fire management, local communities want to be involved and to see better use of local knowledge in fire suppression, protection and recovery.

Who was involved?

Many agencies within Victoria have fire or emergency management responsibilities, including: Country Fire Authority (CFA), State Emergency Services (SES), Victoria Police, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), the Department of Human Services (DHS), Parks Victoria (PV), the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MEFSB), the

Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC), the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) and Local Government.

This project was primarily focused on the roles and responsibilities of DSE and Parks Victoria (PV) but involved partner agencies to build these plans. Community members, interest groups and local networks also have an important responsibility alongside each organisation to manage fire across the landscape. The views and opinions of representatives from these groups were incorporated into the planning and development of DSE's community engagement approach.

How it all began

After the Alpine Fires of 2003 an inquiry was undertaken by government and headed up by the Emergency Services Commissioner. This inquiry produced a report (Esplin et al., 2003) outlining a number of recommendations about enhancing community engagement and using local knowledge in fire planning and management. In response to these recommendations, DSE gained initiative funding to establish an overarching and practical, joint agency strategy to support and further develop the community engagement skills already in fire planning and emergency management disciplines. The project began in August of 2004 and by December 2005 the 'Plan to Improve' and the 'Practical Guide' were finalised and released for use by both DSE and Parks Victoria staff.

Materials and Methods

The project followed a method that ensured robust decisions were made and that there was effective engagement of all players along the way. The steps were:

Project Steps	How to get involved
Define the scope of the project FINISH Dec 2004 COMPLETE	Key staff consulted to get quick snapshot. Staff informed of process from here. Consult Inform
Gather information (Stocktake) FINISH Feb 2005 COMPLETE	All DSE staff and partners consulted about what is already happening. Consult Involve
Establish project direction FINISH Mar 2005 COMPLETE	DSE, CFA, PV staff decide standards, targets, principles. Collaborate
Develop alternatives to help enhance our capacity FINISH Apr 2005 COMPLETE	Staff decide what strategies need to be in the framework Empower
Assess alternatives and decide best way forward FINISH Apr 2005 COMPLETE	Evaluate the strategies against the principles - test these with staff. Consult Inform
Complete Strategy FINISH May 2005 COMPLETE	Write up completed framework, get comments and sign off. Consult Inform

1. The project was scoped to define the aims, milestones and outputs
2. All current information was gathered and analysed from within DSE, across agencies in Victoria, interstate and overseas. A survey was done of staff currently working in fire and community perceptions were gauged through reviewing recent inquiries and feedback notes.
3. The long-term direction was developed through collaboration with key partners. This direction was defined through a set of community engagement standards and key performance indicators the 'Practical Guide'.
4. From our current situation and the standards we had defined a noticeable gap in our current approaches was observed. The strategies to fill this gap were then defined by the staff themselves.
5. The project team alongside the formal committees (Project Control Board and the Project Reference Group) decided which were the key strategies to take forward. These became the key activity areas and the recommendations within the 'Plan to Improve'.

6. The final step in the process was the write-up, sign-off and release of the documents. Ongoing engagement with the staff and management about what this means for action on the ground has continued and will be ongoing throughout the next 3 years.

The "Community Engagement about fire on public land" project, is part of an overall plan to improve community engagement and build stronger, more resilient relationships between fire management in DSE, Parks Victoria, local communities and stakeholders who are affected by and/or deliver fire management services. To assist this process, two documents were produced:

- A. Community Engagement about fire on public land – a practical guide
- B. Community engagement about fire on public land – plan to improve 2005-2009

The underlying message of the project was summed up by Bruce Esplin (2005), Emergency Services Commissioner, Victoria who stated "*Community engagement is not another task. It is the way we do business.*"

A. Community Engagement about Fire on Public Land – A Practical Guide

The practical guide has been designed to help staff engage with communities about fire on public land more effectively. It provides guidelines and checklists that can be used at the beginning of every project to help identify the type and purpose of community engagement most appropriate to an issue and then to effectively scope, plan and measure the effectiveness of that engagement.

The practical guide provides six steps to help staff identify the appropriate type of engagement for their activity or project, and then assess their success based on defined indicators. The steps are:

1. Include the fundamentals
2. Assess the project
3. Choose the appropriate type of engagement
4. Identify and clarify expectations
5. Identify measures of successful engagement
6. Plan your engagement

The first three steps are designed to identify the context of the community engagement, and determine the appropriate level of engagement. Once the type of engagement is determined, steps four and five outline a number of standards and key performance indicators. Step six directs staff to pull the previously determined information together into a community engagement plan. These steps are a direct recognition that previous community engagement processes for fire were more intuitive and reactive than planned, often not documented, and rarely evaluated for effectiveness.

1. Include the fundamentals

Incorporate the three fundamental (or minimum) standards for community engagement into your approach. These are:

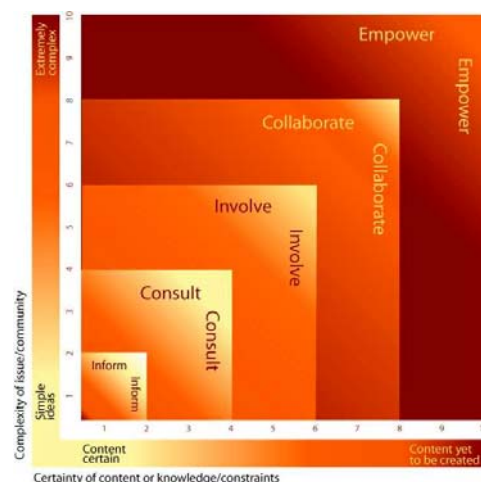
- Know and respect the communities we are working with;
- Follow robust project planning processes, embedding a community engagement plan that is appropriate for the project size and complexity and establishing a framework for evaluating the outcomes of your engagement;
- Undertake works with other fire, public land and emergency management agencies, where possible.

2. Assess the project

The complexity of the issue and community, and the certainty of the content you are dealing with can determine the appropriateness of different engagement types (for collective decision making) see figure 1. A project/activity is assessed on a scale of 1-10 based on two criteria:

- How complex the project / issue is and how complex the community surrounding the issue is?
- How constrained or bounded the decision is?

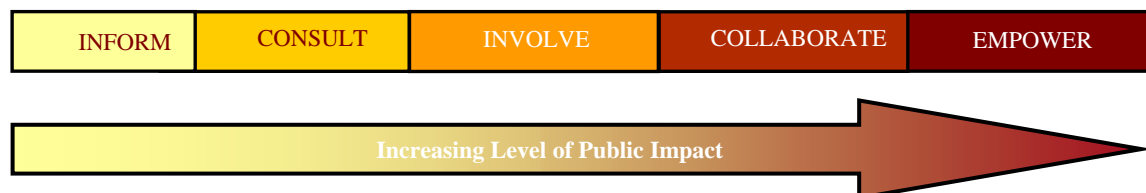
Figure 1 Certainty vs Complexity of your Project or Activity, leading to appropriate engagement type selection.



3. Choose the appropriate type of engagement

From the assessment tool in step 2, a type of engagement for your project will be highlighted. These engagement types are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Engagement type as level of public impact increases



4. Identify and clarifying expectations

Once the type of engagement is chosen for a project/activity, the next step is to refer to the standards for each level of engagement (Table 1). These standards indicate a complete list of what is expected when working successfully at each level of engagement. The overall engagement objectives for fire management should also be referred to, to see what the overall intention is for the activity/project.

5. Identify measures of successful engagement

The standards in step 4 also list Key Performance Indicators (KPI's). These indicators help to establish an evaluation and reporting framework and ensure that evidence can be collected to indicate improvements (Table 1).

6. Plan your engagement

The assessment tool and the standards help to know what is expected. In order to help meet these expectations the DSE *Effective Engagement: Building Relationships With Community and Other Stakeholders* kit provides the steps and templates to help plan the approach in more detail.

Table 1. Examples of standards, key performance indicators and promise for each level of engagement.

Engagement type	Promise	Standards	Examples	Key performance indicators
Inform	We will keep you informed	Provide information in a form that is understandable and accessible to the target audience	Media releases and community updates, displays at local markets, field days	Reduced overlap, duplication burnout and confusion amongst the public
Consult	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge your input	Ensure expectations and level of participation are communicated and managed. Be clear about the government boundaries.	Express your needs or constraints ("the government will be making the final decision") and get the community to express theirs	Expectations of all participants (community and agency) are known
Involve	We will work with you to ensure your thoughts and ideas are directly reflected in the alternatives	Develop a decision making approach early in the project with the involvement of key stakeholders	Develop Fire Operations Plan (FOP) maps together	The public are involved in ways they prefer to be involved – not one size fits all
Collaborate	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent.	Collaborate with the public in as many aspects of the project as possible	Joint burns across land tenure	Both community members and agency staff feel valued as participants in the project (ie making a difference).
Empower	We will implement what you decide and we will support you in your decision. We will ensure the community has the skills and information they need to make the decision.	Facilitate community-led planning, implementation and action at the invitation of the community	Community planning projects	Agencies are sharing control with community groups

B: Community engagement about fire on public land – plan to improve 2005-2009

‘Community Engagement About Fire on Public Land – Plan to Improve 2005 - 2009’ contains recommendations to improve the way DSE relates to people with different views and build strong relationships between government, it’s partner agencies and the community. It is written specifically for those people who will be driving internal improvement and helping staff improve their skills, knowledge and practice in the field of community engagement. It is based on research of what the community wants and the experience of the many staff involved in community engagement at different levels. It is designed to build on and extend existing strengths.

The recommendations within the plan cover ten key activity areas. They have been grouped into those that will be achieved in the short (year 1), medium (year 2 –3) and long-term (year 4). The activities cannot take place in isolation if long-term outcomes are to be achieved. Each set of key activity areas will build on and develop into the next set. Even though some areas will not be achieved until years 3 or 4 they will commence much earlier in order to achieve the cultural change needed in that time.

Achieved Year 1

- Staff learning and development
- Integrated and co-ordinated communication
- Staff support

Achieved Year 2-3

- Planning and evaluation
- Staff working together
- Knowing and respecting our communities
- Learning about fire together
- Resourcing

Achieved Year 4

- The way we do business
- Accountability and risk

The plan builds on our current strengths, supports good practice, provides clear direction and expectations, and focuses actions on activities that will make community engagement more effective. The plan recognises that there is not one formula for community engagement and that the outcomes of community engagement will vary. Most importantly it recognises that the strategy must evolve as we understand and learn more.

Results and Discussion

The appointment of Community Engagement Facilitators for Fire within DSE and PV across Victoria, has allowed for the concurrent implementation of the Community Engagement project whilst completion of the plans and guides were being undertaken. Each facilitator has developed an implementation plan for their region, in line with both the ‘Practical Guide’ and ‘Plan to Improve’. Some examples of achievements to date are outlined below.

Engagement Level: Inform

Fire Management Stage: Prevention

A number of school programs are being developed and implemented to educate students (and ultimately their families) about fire behaviour and role of fire in the Victorian Environment. A pilot program has been developed in the Yarra Ranges with local students and teachers.

Engagement Level: Involve

Fire Management Stage: Preparedness

The development of local ‘fire operations plans’ are evolving from being an internal process where the community were consulted after the fuel reduction burn locations had been determined, to a true ‘involving’ process, where the community help identify the location of the fuel reduction burns and works.

Engagement Level: Inform

Fire Management Stage: Response

During the fires across Victoria in January 2006, Information Units were established within the Incident management teams. Although this is not unusual (these units were established during the Alpine Fires of 2003), they were extended and developed to incorporate more engagement activities. The units ensured current information was provided directly to the community and media through the use of media releases, community updates/newsletters, community meetings and the Victorian Bushfire Information Line. In addition, information about the fire was informally and regularly shared with local residents and visitors through fire staff visiting stores to simply “chat” with people. This process not only shared information with those who would not normally attend a public meeting, it also gathered vital local knowledge from the residents that informed the Incident Management Team about such things as correct road names and specific location of the fire front.

Engagement Level: Collaborate

Fire Management Stage: Recovery

A pilot project has been established in response to the Grampians fire in January 2006. This project will ensure local community knowledge, experience and connectivity is utilised in the recovery phase of this fire. Through asking community members about their concerns, looking for ways to alter rehabilitation plans as a result of community feedback, and actively engaging with the angry residents, these recovery efforts have been fundamental in reshaping DSE's role in recovery.

Evaluation of community engagement in fire management and impact of the project

As a formal part of the project, two evaluation pilots are being implemented to focus on evaluating community engagement within fire management. One is evaluating the engagement of the community around the development of a Fire Operations Plan in the urban/rural interface area of the Dandenong Ranges. The second is focused on integrated municipal fire management planning within a previously fire affected area. Although in their infancy, these pilots have already yielded some important lessons. These include:

- Good evaluation planning is in itself an engagement process.
- Understanding what our sponsors and stakeholders request ensures we can more easily collect evidence to demonstrate effectiveness.
- Most people are not sure what they want from community engagement but are keen to identify and articulate the benefits.
- Everyone from the Minister to community members are interested in learning about how we can include local knowledge in government decision making.

Some anecdotal feedback received after the recent January 2006 fires indicates that the project is having some impact, although work still needs to be done.

- "This is the first time DSE has taken care of the people and not just the forest".
- "Information provided at the community meetings, on the internet and especially ABC radio was consistently outstanding and appreciated by those of us who were feeling vulnerable and isolated during this time".
- "The community updates have helped me to help others".
- "The newsletter was wonderful and the community meetings. We all felt really supported".
- "The community meetings have been good. I've learnt so much. Very educational".
- "It was very beneficial to receive the facts first hand and to discuss fire plan strategies".

Conclusion

The underlying message of the project is that community engagement is not another task, but the way we do business (Esplin, 2005).

Key project learnings to date:

- Supporting staff and volunteers through good internal engagement, capacity building and strong leadership is vital to ensuring good community engagement occurs,
- Providing situations where staff can practice and learn without major repercussions is essential to development and acceptance of community engagement,
- Ensuring community engagement is everyone's job - every day, not "someone else's job" and an add-on is important to the sustainability of good engagement practices,
- Managing political needs alongside community needs is difficult, and requires effort,
- Ensuring comprehensive evaluation of community engagement is necessary in order to collect evidence and stories that will build confidence and commitment in others,
- It is vital that all players in the area work to integrate their engagement activities in order that burn-out and confusion are minimised for the public and to ensure we learn from each other.

Acknowledgements

The project team wishes to thank representatives of the Project Control Board and the Project Reference Group for the input and energy they gave to the project and to their ongoing commitment to innovation and development in the area of community engagement.

In addition to the two formal groups, staff from a wide range of organisations contributed their valuable time and knowledge to meetings and workshops to help build the 'Plan to Improve' and the 'Practical Guide'. Thanks also to the specialists that dedicated one on one time to shape the recommendations and tools.

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