EVALUATION OF DRILL EVACUATION EXERCISES OF NOOJEE AND LAVERS HILL COMMUNITIES ON 15TH AND 18TH NOVEMBER 2011

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to particular findings by the Black Saturday Royal Commission Report, the Victorian Government made an election commitment for a community fire drill pilot program in two high fire risk communities to test simulated responses to selected fire scenarios. The Victorian Fire Services Commissioner directed the conduct of a series of community evacuation exercises as a Government initiative on 15th and 18th November 2011. The Project consisted of drill evacuation exercises of two communities (NOOJEE and LAVERS HILL) in high bushfire risk areas.

Emergency Command and Control arrangements, emergency preparedness information and warnings, arrangements for evacuations, and relief and recovery operations were all exercised. All were planned and conducted with maximum community consultation and participation, guided by a wide range of government and NGO emergency agencies.

In general, the exercises were seen as very successful. Many lessons were identified, procedures were confirmed and such vital tools as Township Protection Plans and Evacuation Plans were confirmed and amended in light of the learnings. The experience will be used to improve the preparedness of the two communities involved and disseminated across the State for other communities to benefit.
SUMMARY OF LEARNINGS

- Future community exercises should be planned in the knowledge that significant resources (in personnel and logistics) will need to be committed for the Exercise itself and in preparation activities.
- The success of the Exercises was due in no small way to the thorough and effective preparedness activities carried out.
- Relevant TPPs, Guidelines, Phoenix and JSOPs are very useful and practical tools.
- Incident/Emergency Management Teams must give attention to ‘What happens after the fire passes through?’ with a view to minimising property and infrastructure losses and must provide communities with estimated times of return.
- The ability and willingness of communities to participate in, contribute to and make decisions about their own circumstances must not be underestimated and must be tapped into for all such events.
- As many feedback media as possible need to be applied to maximise feedback returns. In addition, it may be useful to appoint ‘wandering interviewers’ to seek and record community and agency representatives’ feedback ‘on-the-spot’.
- Expectations of both the scale of response on an emergency day, and of the prospect of large numbers of these exercises in the future, need to be managed.
- Lessons learned constitute a ‘Return on Investment’ and must be captured from Agencies after Exercises.
- Communities seek and appreciate strong (but sensitive and relevant) leadership from the emergency management agencies and from senior politicians and bureaucrats.
- Within communities there are existing leaders (who may sometimes need support to ‘take up the mantle’). They are welcomed and recognised by their peers as more credible (and more aware of local issues and conditions) than outsiders, and so are a vital asset in strengthening the community’s resilience.
- One challenge lies in the fact that community leaders are invariably members of response agencies (volunteers or paid) and in an emergency may not be available to act in their community leadership roles.
- The policy of sending mobile and landline warnings to billing addresses, rather than to postcodes or area coverage must be reviewed.
- Multiple warning media must continue to be used.
- The content (“What do you want us to DO?”), size (ie number of characters) and language of the warnings must be appropriate, specific and ‘plain-speak’. CALD and Disability messaging issues must also be addressed.
- Tourism Victoria must be engaged in future similar events (including to advise on cultural issues).
- In keeping with the principle that the more informed the community is, the more they will make the right decisions, the CSMS system should be considered for adoption to provide targeted information to communities before, during and after events.
- Multiple information systems (such as highway signs, media) must be used as a matter of routine to maximise the community information available.
- Media coverage was essential to reinforce the importance of their involvement for the communities and to enable the message to be spread to other communities.
- Strong, professional media liaison staff are vital to ensuring a positive outcome from the media.
- Relief and Recovery activities must be included in all future exercises.
- VICPOL presence is required at relief and recovery centres.
- There is a requirement for common, reliable, standardised, all-agency communications capability.
- Communications systems must be pre-planned and practiced to enable alternative arrangements to be introduced where shortcomings are identified.
- If satellite or temporary networks are required, they must be introduced.
- Careful attention must be paid to the make-up (and briefing) of participants in ‘Wet Safety Escorts’.
- VICROADS should be represented at all future similar exercises.
- Exercise Control briefings must include Exercise site inspections.
- Particularly when community members are involved, the appointment of one or more designated safety officers is essential.
- Evacuation Plans must be constantly updated to reflect experiences gained.
- Identification and contact information of vulnerable people in communities must be actively updated on a regular basis.
- Arrangements for vulnerable people must figure high in IMT planning.
- Because it constitutes such a significant part of the LAVERS HILL community, fire/evacuation preparedness of the school must receive urgent attention in the near future. DEECD representatives, guided by comprehensive feedback from the Principal, will pursue a number of issues raised.
- DEECD representatives should be available for all future exercises.
EVALUATION OF DRILL EVACUATION EXERCISES OF NOOJEE AND LAVERS HILL COMMUNITIES ON 15TH AND 18TH NOVEMBER 2011

BACKGROUND

In response to particular findings by the Black Saturday Royal Commission Report\(^1\), the Victorian Fire Services Commissioner directed the conduct of a series of community evacuation exercises as a Government initiative on 15\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) November 2011. The Project consisted of drill evacuation exercises of two communities in high bushfire risk areas. They were designed to contribute to preparations prior to the 2011/12 Summer Fire Season.

The two communities chosen (with the agreement of their respective communities) were NOOJEE (in Gippsland) and LAVERS HILL (in the Otway Ranges). The Fire Services Commissioner had lead responsibility and was supported by VICPOL, CFA, DSE, MFB, DHS, OESC and the two municipalities from the communities where the evacuation exercises were conducted. A Steering Committee consisting of representatives from the above organisations oversaw the design and conduct of the exercises\(^2\).

The outcomes from the project are to be shared among agencies and the communities who participated. A final report will be prepared and provided to the Minister for Bushfire Response.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the Project was as follows:

- Establish Steering Committee;
- Develop Project Plan with clear objectives;
- Identify townships;
- Develop a project methodology and develop tools;
- Identify local level officers to manage evacuations;
- Conduct evacuation exercises; and
- Evaluate and report.


\(^2\) The following agencies also made significant contributions to the planning and conduct of the Exercises: DHS, Dept of Health, Colac Otway Shire, Baw Baw Shire, Department of Education, Early Childhood and Development (DEECD), VicRoads, Ambulance Victoria, SES, Red Cross, DoT, Parks Victoria, VC Emergencies Ministry, Centrelink.
OBJECTIVES

The Project objectives were to:

- engage the communities of two townships in high-risk bushfire prone areas in order to conduct two community evacuation drills; and
- conduct research into these evacuations and identify learnings that can be documented and shared locally, state-wide and nationally.

SCOPE

The scope of this Report is to document an evaluation of the process used to conduct the community evacuations including the community engagement methodologies employed, the learnings from the conduct of the evacuations, identification of improvements for any subsequent evacuations and collection and evaluation of feedback from communities participating in the evacuations.

Other evaluation tasks were undertaken by other organisations:

- **Operational Evaluation** – an operational evaluation that identifies key factual information such as time of exercise initiation, scenario, observations, number of participants, outcomes, learnings and post exercise feedback. (Undertaken by VICPOL).

- **A Model for Conducting Evacuation Exercises** – through active involvement and observation a model is to be developed for conducting community evacuations that is transferable to other townships across the state and nationally. (Responsibility: Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner (OESC) with input from the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI)).

- **A Research Paper on Community Evacuations** - a research paper that considers existing research in this field and adds to the body of knowledge on this subject for use by researchers and practitioners in the Emergency Management sector using data and evidence from the two community evacuations. (Responsibility: OESC with assistance from AEMI)

This Report should be read in concert with these other three documents for a full evaluation of the exercises.

THIS REPORT

This Report will specifically analyse the following key features of the Evacuation Exercises:

- Processes of engagement (community engagement methodologies) employed before, during and after the evacuations;
• collection and evaluation of feedback from communities participating in the evacuations;
• the learnings from the conduct of the evacuations;
• identification of improvements for any subsequent evacuations.

The Report is a distillation and a summation of literally hundreds of documents, feedback forms, maps, plans, policies, directives, accounts and interviews. Of necessity, it omits much of the detail involved and adopts a strategic approach to the issues involved without, hopefully, losing the essence of the events and the learnings.

THE TOWNS

NOOJEE³. Population 260 (approx.), situated in a heavily forested valley in northern Gippsland, one road in/one road out.

LAVERS HILL⁴. Population 200 (approx.), situated on a ridge at the foot of the Otway Ranges, straddling the Great Ocean Road.

Both towns are included in the 52 towns in Victoria identified as most at risk from bushfire. The communities of both towns volunteered to participate in these Exercises.

THE EXERCISES

The two exercises were designed and conducted from a common template (a document issued by the European Union office of Red Cross International – A Community-based Emergency Exercise Guide⁵), with planning and implementation information shared between the two Exercise Directors and various participants. As a result, there was considerable commonality between the exercises - in objectives planning, scenario, conduct, and personnel.

Commonalities

• Both exercises were based on the respective Township Protection Plans of the two towns.
• Both exercises were based on what each community wanted to see included as a result of community consultation (eg. The LAVERS HILL community wanted the scenario to be based on an ‘Extreme’ fire danger day, rather than a ‘Code Red’ day, because “On a Code Red day, we’ll all be gone!” Further, “Although we probably won’t

³ http://noojee.gippsland.com/

“The exercise proved to be an excellent way for emergency service organisations to engage with the community to share information and concerns and to highlight the personal responsibility that we all have, living and travelling in high bushfire risk environments”  
Agency member
evacuate because it will be too dangerous, we want to practice an evacuation to Johanna Beach”).

- The objectives of the two exercises were the same:
  - To educate residents of the LAVERS HILL/NOOJEE Townships with Evacuation guidelines and principles in the event of an imminent bushfire threat.
  - To educate residents of the LAVERS HILL/NOOJEE Townships with the Evacuation Plan developed for their township.
  - To practice one of the Evacuation options contained in the LAVERS HILL/NOOJEE Townships’ Evacuation Plans.
  - To enable residents to practice responding to an Emergency Alert (EA) Warning to Evacuate.
  - Both towns have high levels of tourists.
  - To identify any unforeseen Evacuation contingencies that residents may utilise in activating the LAVERS HILL/NOOJEE Evacuation Plans.

**Differences**

- At LAVERS HILL, a full-scale evacuation was carried out (at the community’s request in the planning phase), whereas at NOOJEE the exercise was defined as an evacuation in response to an Emergency Alert/Police Operation and movement to an assembly point.
- The LAVERS HILL Exercise began mid-morning, Noojee’s began mid-afternoon.
- Two different fire scenarios were used (one fast-running on an Extreme fire day; the other – fire in the environment, with a Code Red day forecast next day).

**Evaluation Methodology**

The following processes were undertaken to evaluate the exercises:

- Observation (by evaluators and agency members);
- Hard copy feedback forms completed by community members, agency exercise participants, observers;
- Electronic survey (by Survey Monkey);
- ‘Hot debriefs’ of communities and agencies;
- Formal debriefs of communities and agencies;
- Media monitoring; and
- Interviews by evaluators of agency participants and community members.

**Command & Control**

Command and Control procedures were established in accordance with the arrangements defined by the Emergency Management Manual of Victoria, and followed the guidance outlined in Part 8, Appendix 9 Evacuation Guidelines and relevant JSOPs. Incident

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Emergency Management Teams (IMT/EMT) were established at NOOJEE and COLAC (with a Divisional Fire Control and Exercise Director at LAVERS HILL and Deputy Exercise Director at Johanna Beach). The exercising of the IMT/EMTs was seen to be one of the essential factors which contributed to the success of the exercises.

The Phoenix Rapid Fire Model again proved invaluable to determine communities at risk. Both Exercises provided an opportunity to practice the ‘new’ VICPOL role of Evacuation Manager\(^7\). The Command and Control arrangements were evaluated as having worked successfully.

One issue that should be considered further: Incident Controllers should review arrangements for timing and resourcing of ‘return-to-town’ after an evacuation, to limit the potential accusations of ‘You burnt out our town by taking us all away’. Similarly, the community should be given clear advice about how long they can expect to be away.

Arrangements were made for ensuring the security of people and property once the evacuation began. Appropriate \textit{preparedness} activities were implemented (including ‘lead-up’ EMT meetings [mostly by teleconference] in the days before the predicted bad conditions). Appropriate mapping was distributed, Staging Area details were prepared, Traffic Management Plans were produced, Township Protection Plans\(^8\) (TPP) (incorporating Evacuation Plans) were distributed (to community members and agencies), Control/Running Sheets were distributed to agencies and relevant briefings were provided appropriately to agency participants, observers, Exercise Control and community members. Planning and Exercise-writing teams were appointed months beforehand. Agencies rostered a significant number of staff for participation on the day and in the lead-up to the Exercises. It was a very positive reflection of the commitment by agencies to the Exercises.

TPPs were assessed as having been a very useful planning tool. It was recognised that they still require some refinement (including one suggestion, that mention of the role of Red Cross and the Registration process, using NRIS, should be included).

\textbf{Learnings:}

\(^7\) Some discussion has arisen concerning where the Evacuation Manager should be physically located.(IPOC or ICC?)

\(^8\) \url{http://cfaonline.cfa.vic.gov.au/mycfa/Show?pageId=publicTownshipProtectionPlans}
Future community exercises need to be planned in the knowledge that significant resources (in personnel and logistics) will need to be committed for the Exercise itself and in preparation activities.

The success of the Exercises was due in no small way to the thorough and effective preparedness activities carried out.

Relevant TPPs, Guidelines, Phoenix and JSOPs are very useful and practical tools.

Incident/Emergency Management Teams must give attention to ‘What happens after the fire passes through?’ with a view to minimising property and infrastructure losses and must provide communities with estimated times of return.

Community Consultation

At both sites, a series of Community Meetings was held before and after the events, with strong attendance and participation by agencies. In all cases, significant numbers of community members attended and contributed to decisions about what scenario should be used, where the evacuation should go to and the names of the Exercises. In particular, the communities used the opportunities to raise issues about overall community fire safety with the agencies (and each other!) The author and other observers were particularly taken by the way in which the conversations at the community meetings they attended evolved in maturity, with the first conversations focussing on “my-back-yard” issues, but later developing into whole-of-community issues and resilience-building measures, with guidance from agency members.

Learning:

- The ability and willingness of communities to participate in, contribute to and make decisions about their own circumstances must not be underestimated and must be tapped into for all such events.

Community Feedback

NOOJEE: A hot debrief was conducted at the assembly point at completion of the Exercise. A ‘cold’ community debrief was held at Noojee on 12 January 2012. A total of 42 Survey forms were completed.

LAVERS HILL: A debrief was conducted at the evacuation site on completion of the Exercise. A community meeting was held the following week to gain further feedback.

“I would really like to thank the organisers of the day. And point out that although at first glance it would appear that there may have been more uniformed persons than local residents. But the truth is, such a very large number of our community perform in the services (CFA, SES, CERT, etc.), they were hiding in plain sight. It is unfortunate that many others had to continue their regular day job and were unable to attend.” Community member

9 While the online survey (by Survey Monkey) was widely publicised, it received a disappointing minimum takeup. At time of writing - NOOJEE: 1; LAVERS HILL: 3.
A total of 28 Survey forms were completed.

Attachment A is a listing of all comments provided by community members, agency representatives and observers.

One significant issue that featured strongly in post-exercise community meetings/debriefs was the recognition that in a real situation, evacuation may NOT be the first choice option, and that the scenarios of these exercises were deliberately scripted to gain maximum ‘practice’ effect for the maximum number of people and agencies. Similarly, the exercises did not reflect the actual roles that may be played by various agency personnel in a real emergency, particularly if there was more than one community affected. It was important to highlight that communities should not raise expectations of response capabilities based on these scenarios.

Learnings:

- As many feedback media as possible need to be applied to maximise feedback returns. In addition, it may be useful to appoint ‘wandering interviewers’ to seek and record community and agency representatives’ feedback ‘on-the-spot’.
- Expectations of both the scale of response on an emergency day, and of the prospect of large numbers of these exercises in the future, need to be managed.

Agency Feedback

Various Observer, Agency and multi-Agency debriefs were held at completion of the Exercises and in the days following and have informed the observations in this report. The significant points raised have been incorporated at Annex A and will inform future Exercises.

Learning:

- Lessons learned constitute a ‘Return on Investment’ and must be captured from Agencies after Exercises.

Leadership

Three types of leadership were exhibited and appreciated by the communities:

- The leadership shown by the agencies, in particular by the two Exercise Directors (Inspector Ricky Ross and Inspector Michelle Henderson) was seen to be inspiring, professional and inclusive. Both communities commented in the
strongest terms about how they appreciated the leadership shown (by all agencies).

- The leadership shown by individual community members in helping to guide their communities through these exercises and, indeed, through a broader consideration of their community’s fire safety and preparedness, was an essential feature of the exercises.
- The third type of leadership appreciated by the community members and the agencies was the commitment and involvement by the Deputy Premier and Minister for Police and Emergency Services and for Bushfire Response, the Hon. Peter Ryan and the Fire Services Commissioner, Mr Craig Lapsley. Their insistence on introducing these community-based exercises and their participation in them was seen as strongly reinforcing and endorsing their significance.

Learnings:
- Communities seek and appreciate strong (but sensitive and relevant) leadership from the emergency management agencies and from senior politicians and bureaucrats.
- Within communities there are existing leaders (who may sometimes need support to ‘take up the mantle’). They are welcomed and recognised by their peers as more credible (and more aware of local issues and conditions) than outsiders, and so are a vital asset in strengthening the community’s resilience.
- One challenge lies in the fact that community leaders are invariably members of response agencies (volunteers or paid) and in an emergency may not be available to act in their community leadership roles.

Warnings/Messaging

The Emergency Alert (EA) warning system was used in both Exercises. In both Exercises there were delays in the transmission of the EA warnings. In NOOJEE, the delay amounted to some 20 minutes after the Incident Controller directed its transmission. The delay was caused by poor 3G reception caused by the topography. LAVERS HILL delays were caused by processes within the IMT. OSOM Templates were used effectively. Public Information Section teams responded well to the pressure placed on them to produce (in rapid succession) timely, relevant and tailored OSOM/EA messages. It should be noted that the One Source One Message (OSOM) messages were deliberately not issued in these exercises to ensure that ‘false’ messages were not received and acted upon by agencies not involved. This policy may well be reversed in future exercises.

Most community residents reported that they received the message either by mobile phone or landline or both.\(^{10}\) It should be noted that voice messages are very unreliable and un-

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\(^{10}\) As an indication, at LAVERS HILL, 268 mobile services were impacted, of which 165 had messages delivered; 145 landline calls were placed, 100 answered. Perhaps a study should be done to find out what happened to the others?
repeatable unless the recipient has an answering machine. (Even then, in some cases the answering machines judged the call to be a ‘not-call’.)

Character limit and the need to express warnings in ‘plain talk’ caused some difficulties in framing (and sending) EA messages.

The policy of sending warnings to eligible mobile phones by subscriber service address attracted universal condemnation. At both sites, the presence of tourists (large numbers in season) is a huge concern, given that they will not receive EA messages. For this reason (among others) input from Tourism Victoria would have been useful at the exercises.

Door knocking warnings (particularly of vulnerable people) and vehicular loudspeaker warnings were provided by VICPOL, DSE and CFA personnel. These warnings reflected the EA warnings. Some community members advised that this was how they received their warning, reinforcing the importance of adopting multiple media for warnings (particularly for communities with patchy mobile reception).

Cultural issues around warnings must be considered, particularly in such tourist-popular areas as these towns. For example, tourists from Japan could be expected to react to siren warnings by seeking higher ground, since they would expect such a warning to signify a tsunami.

Learnings:

- The policy of sending mobile and landline warnings to billing addresses, rather than to postcodes or area coverage must be reviewed.
- Multiple warning media must continue to be used.
- The content (“What do you want us to DO?”), size (ie number of characters) and language of the warnings must be appropriate, specific and ‘plain-speak’. CALD and Disability messaging issues must also be addressed.
- Tourism Victoria must be engaged in future similar events (including to advise on cultural issues).

Preparedness Information

SMS messaging for NOOJEE residents was provided, as a trial, by CommunitySMS (CSMS)\(^\text{11}\). This system enabled police to “speak” directly to the local community by SMS, Email and by posting information on a postcode page. CSMS allows local police to quickly and securely communicate directly with their community. It enables information available from multiple sources (CFA, VICPOL, Vic Roads, Local Government) to be provided from one source, localised for targeted communities. It has the capability of providing Assembly points, exercise schedule, safe places, Township Protection Plans, etc. It was universally praised by community members and agency participants. Its broader application should be further investigated.

\(^{11}\) [www.csms.org.au](http://www.csms.org.au)
Local media (in LAVERS HILL, the weekly Otway Light) was used very effectively to provide communities with relevant preparation information.

Electronic traffic signs were mounted at strategic highway positions (with VICPOL traffic management personnel during the Exercise) effectively warning travellers of the exercise.

**Learnings:**

- In keeping with the principle that the more informed the community is, the more they will make the right decisions, the CSMS system should be considered for adoption to provide targeted information to communities before, during and after events.
- Multiple information systems (such as highway signs, media) must be used as a matter of routine to maximise the community information available.

**Media**

There was significant media interest in these first community exercises undertaken in the State. Print media contributed some lead-in coverage, and on the day there was significant radio and television coverage. Coordination and support for the media were professionally managed by media liaison staff of the Fire Services Commissioner and VICPOL. A comprehensive media strategy was prepared in advance. The coverage was generally positive (by Metropolitan and regional outlets) and there were no incidents of inappropriate, disruptive or intrusive media attention. Follow-up print media coverage has appeared in the Otway Light, the Colac Herald, the Surf Coast Times and the Weekly Times.

**Learnings:**

- Media coverage was essential to reinforce the importance of their involvement for the communities and to enable the message to be spread to other communities.
- Strong, professional media liaison staff are vital to ensuring a positive outcome from the media.

**Relief and Recovery**

Pre-positioned facilities and resources at the staging area (NOOJEE) and the evacuation area (JOHANNA BEACH) were carefully thought out and generally appropriate to help community members. Agencies took the opportunity to provide educative materials (CFA, SES) and to help communities visualise what relief and recovery services would be available in a real evacuation (DHS, VCC Emergencies Ministry, Centrelink, Colac Otway and Baw Baw Shire Councils, and Red Cross).
Vulnerable people were identified and warnings and evacuation options were appropriate and implemented. It is noteworthy that these towns might not be reflective of the larger numbers of vulnerable people in other potentially affected communities.

Registration of evacuees was carried out at both NOOJEE and JOHANNA BEACH. This provided an opportunity to follow up those who were pre-registered but did not turn up. At NOOJEE, although the ‘end-state’ was the transition/staging area, Red Cross took the opportunity to train some of their staff in the procedures required by the National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS). 78 people were registered. Baw Baw Shire Council distributed USB information regarding preparedness information which was very well received.

Issues arose which reinforced the need for a VICPOL presence at relief and recovery centres.

While resources and facilities for community members were appropriate and effective at both sites for a crowd of displaced people, some details relating to timely provision of drinks, shade, age-appropriate arrangements for children, and facilities for pets needed some fine-tuning.

Learnings:

- Relief and Recovery activities must be included in all future exercises.
- VICPOL presence is required at relief and recovery centres.

Communications

Once again (as with virtually every emergency and exercise in recent times) communication within and between agencies was less than optimal.

At LAVERS HILL:

- The Police Mobile Facility (Incident Police Operations Centre (IPOC) at Johanna Beach had virtually no communications capability. The Police Event & Emergency Communications (PEEC) system was not operating. There were no radio communications at the Johanna Beach registration point.
- There was no Victoria Police dedicated channel for the Exercise. Police had to use operational radio channel SMR L1 & were unable to get a dedicated channel via SMR
- For Exercise Control communications, the DSE/CFA channel 119 didn’t work and mobile phones had to be used. Mobile phone coverage/service was limited.
- Vehicles from different agencies in the convoy at LAVERS HILL were unable to communicate with each other!

At NOOJEE:

- The Police Mobile Facility (Incident Command Post - ICP) was positioned at the Noojee School Assembly area and was utilised for the Police Evacuation Operation.
• Communications was by way of mobile phone and Police SMR local 2 radio. A Police portable radio was connected to a CFA Arial point at Exercise Control.
• Police members used a mapping system at the Incident Command Post where sectored areas were marked off as door knocking was completed.

Learnings:

• There is a requirement for common, reliable, standardised, all-agency communications capability.
• Communications systems must be pre-planned and practiced to enable alternative arrangements to be introduced where shortcomings are identified.
• If satellite or temporary networks are required, they must be introduced.

Evacuation

The NOOJEE Incident Controller made arrangements for briefing of participants at the transit centre (NOOJEE school). The absence of a VICROADS representative meant a missed opportunity for advice and support.

The LAVERS HILL ‘Wet Safety Escort’ consisted of 4 buses for school children and VICPOL, CFA, SES and CERT vehicles. This format was successfully tested by two unplanned events:

• A ‘human tree’ (a disgruntled citizen who thought the scenario was not sufficiently realistic) blocked the road (creating some safety concerns). VICPOL were able to satisfactorily deal with him (as would the SES vehicle if it had been a real tree).
• The lead vehicle of the ‘Wet Safety Escort’ missed the turn-off to the evacuation point. The highway warning sign at the turn off was wrongly positioned and no traffic management personnel were present. The convoy then had to turn around (on a stretch of highway with minimum appropriate turning places). A pre-exercise site inspection may have prevented this from occurring.

Learnings:

• Careful attention must be paid to the make-up (and briefing) of participants in ‘Wet Safety Escorts’.
• VICROADS should be represented at all future similar exercises.
• Exercise Control briefings must include Exercise site inspections.

“The exercise was certainly not a representation of a real-life situation. Due to prior publicity, there existed a heightened anticipation that gave rise to unrealistically prompt response from emergency services and public. The exercise provided scant insight into the likely tumultuous response of tourists passing through the evacuation zone.” Community member
Safety

Safety officers were appointed for each Exercise and reinforced their value by oversighting such issues as separation of cars and people at various venues, giving safety briefings to all participants. The outcome: no injuries.

Learning:
- Particularly when community members are involved, the appointment of one or more designated safety officers is essential.

Evacuation Plans

Both evacuation plans were progressively updated during the preparedness phase of the Exercises. Both of them will be further amended to incorporate the lessons learned, as will the Township Protection Plans, and promulgated to the communities and agencies.

Learning:
- Evacuation Plans must be constantly updated to reflect experiences gained.

Vulnerable People

Lists of vulnerable people in each location were available (from DHS and Local Government Authorities) and used by IMT/EMTs to ensure that appropriate warning and transportation strategies were enacted for each. Efforts were taken to ensure the ‘lists’ were up to date.

School children. The NOOJEE school has some 10 students. The school is identified as the assembly point in case of evacuation. Unfortunately, there was no representation from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to identify school and school children issues and to provide advice. They had been involved in planning but fell away due to a communications gap in exercise planning.

LAVERS HILL has a P-12 College with some 100 enrolments, most of whom are bussed daily into the school. The school and staff and students are seen by the community as very vulnerable. Much work has been done to make the school more fire-ready but there is still much more to be done before it could be seen as a haven - a preference expressed by the Principal and by the community. (For example, there is only one access road into and out of the school grounds).

The current Evacuation Plan directs the evacuation of students and staff by buses. This was an essential part of the Exercise scenario insisted upon by the community.
A number of challenges arose (some foreseen, others not; some minor, some larger). The presence and involvement of a senior representative of the DEECD, members of the school Council, parents and Principals of a number of other Victorian schools as observers meant that these challenges received high visibility. They included availability of buses (and drivers) with little or no notice; medical and dietary requirements of particular children; some aspects of the school’s own planning.

Feedback from community members and school and DEECD authorities advises:

- In a real emergency, on a non-Code Red day, congestion and traffic problems would arise from parents attending the school to take children to safety;
- On a Code Red day, when the school would be closed and children would be at home, child care issues would:
  - Reduce the number of people available for Response Agency duties;
  - Possibly place some unsupervised children at risk;
  - Result in some economic hardship issues for some families.

**Learnings:**

- Identification and contact information of vulnerable people in communities must be actively updated on a regular basis.
- Arrangements for vulnerable people must figure high in IMT planning.
- Because it constitutes such a significant part of the LAVERS HILL community, fire/evacuation preparedness of the school must receive urgent attention in the near future. DEECD representatives, guided by comprehensive feedback from the Principal, will pursue a number of issues raised.
- DEECD representatives should be available for all future exercises.

**Legacies**

There are a number of legacies from the Exercises:

- The process of preparing for and participating in the Exercises caused the two communities to raise, consider and discuss a much broader range of fire preparedness issues affecting their communities. Follow-up meetings have caused them to initiate further action. In LAVERS HILL, a post-exercise community meeting resolved to form a compact between the Community House and the Progress Association to produce and implement a Community Issues Register, outlining measures to be lobbied for to improve the fire preparedness of the community.

- Agencies have taken the opportunity to take on board the lessons learned during these Exercises to amend, adjust and upgrade their own plans and procedures for future operations. A number of new procedures and policies have been introduced since the last fire season and this opportunity to rehearse them was invaluable before the 2011/12 fire season. Similarly, the exercises have strengthened Agency

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12 Problems relating to emergency availability of buses mean that private bus companies must be involved.
interoperability by providing an opportunity for Preparing, Exercising & Training together, gaining an enhanced understanding of one another’s capacity & capability, resources, SOPs etc.

- Once again, the importance of Emergency Service Providers utilising “plain talk” and not “EM talk” to convey messages and communicate with the community was highlighted.

- The involvement of the respective Local Government Authorities was seen by communities and agencies as a worthwhile and positive reinforcement of the strong and active roles they play, and the wealth of knowledge and responsibility they contribute, to municipal emergency management planning.

- The DEECD used the LAVERS HILL Exercise as an opportunity to exercise their State Control Room and regional and State procedures and staff, ‘piggy-backing’ on the evacuation exercise. Similarly, Red Cross took the opportunity to further their training program at NOOJEE. This should be encouraged for other agencies for future similar events.

- Feedback concerning the policy of Leaving Early on successive Code Red Days or high risk fire danger days raised a number of issues which may militate against widespread take-up of the policy:
  - Financial impact on members of the community and their livelihood (if business is at home) eg: farming, tourism, catering, livestock, pets.
  - Cost in fuel/travel/accommodation to vacate their residence may cause people to choose to “shelter in place” rather than leave early.
  - Residents may become complacent and ignore future warnings if, having left early, an emergency does not eventuate. (The “Cry wolf” syndrome).
- Security becomes a concern when residents have been away from their homes for any length of time.

- Where possible, local contractors (catering, accommodation, rubbish removal) were utilised to contribute to local economies.

- Department of transport (DOT) is following up on a State-wide basis, issues concerning emergency availability of school buses and drivers.

- There is no doubt the resilience of these two communities has been enhanced. The challenge is to provide opportunities to continue that momentum and to provide similar triggers for other communities.