

# Community Engagement about fire on Public Land

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## Abstract

The overall aim of this project is to underpin all aspects of fire management with a sound knowledge of community engagement and to ensure integration of community values alongside the environmental and safety outcomes associated with managing fire on public land.

“Community Engagement about Fire on Public Land --- A Practical Guide” was developed by the Department of Sustainability & Environment (DSE) in 2005. This guide defines what is expected of staff in terms of engaging the public about fire management activities (the standards) and details key performance indicators (KPI's) that can be measured to tell us whether we have been successful or not.

Five engagement types were used in the “Practical Guide”, based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum. These types are inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. Community engagement standards have been developed for each of these five types of engagement and for each of the phases of fire management (prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and prescribed burning).

Both the development and now implementation of this guide has been in collaboration with Parks Victoria (PV), Country Fire Authority (CFA), Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Department of Human Services (DHS).

Since the release of the “Practical Guide” in 2006 a number of examples of improved community engagement about fire on public land exist within Victoria. These include community engagement around the development and implementation of three year Fire Operations Plans, and communication with the community during and after wildfire events (eg Grampians and Great Divide fires).

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## Introduction

### *Background*

The Victorian Bushfire Inquiry conducted by the Emergency Services Commissioner following major fires in Victoria in 2003 listed a number of recommendations. These include; increasing the use and value of local knowledge in fire planning, additional effort and resources for working with Victorian communities to be better prepared for future fire threats.

While the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry may have been the catalyst for an increased effort by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) in Community Engagement, there is also a genuine desire and identified need from the field to achieve greater public support for fire management on public land.

In response to this, DSE developed a strategy “*Community Engagement about Fire on Public Land*” (DSE 2005), to support and further develop the community engagement skills already in fire planning and emergency management disciplines. DSE gained initiative funding to develop the strategy from the National Disaster Mitigation Program, further funding for the implementation has come from the Public Land Fire Funding. In conjunction with the development of this strategy, community

engagement facilitators were appointed for fire within DSE and Parks Victoria (PV) Statewide to assist in its implementation. Implementation began in 2006.

The levels of engagement used in the strategy are based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) engagement spectrum. Figure 1 outlines the goal of each engagement type.

Figure 1: The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum.

<b>Inform</b>	<b>Consult</b>	<b>Involve</b>	<b>Collaborate</b>	<b>Empower</b>
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on projects, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout projects to ensure public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in projects or in each aspect of making a decision.	To place part or all of a project in the hands of the public or enable them to make decisions that we will implement together.

Community engagement standards have been developed for each of these levels of engagement, and within each phase of fire management (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery), (DSE 2005).

#### *Recent Events*

Since the strategy development, Victoria has again experienced a number of campaign fires including: Grampians, Kinglake, Anakie, Casterton and the Great Divide.

#### Map 1 – Fires in Victoria for 2005/2006 & 2006/2007.

Through each of these events significant progress in community engagement was made towards achieving the following key outcomes of the strategy:

- An organisation that knows, listens to, understands and values its many and diverse stakeholders;
- An organisation that effectively engages and involves its stakeholders in its decision-making process;

- An organisation that delivers a consistent ‘one voice’, professional service to the community and its other stakeholder groups.

This paper presents four case studies of how community engagement is being integrated into the stages of fire management - Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery. This shows that community engagement in fire management, like fire management itself, requires a 365 day a year commitment.

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## CASE STUDY 1

### PREVENTION: MILDURA DISTRICT FIRE PROTECTION PLAN REVIEW

The DSE is responsible for the integrated management of Victoria’s natural resource base including land management, resource development and utilisation, and protection, conservation and environmental management of natural resources.

The Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land Revision 1 (DSE 2006) provides a framework for fire management procedure and practice on public land in Victoria, with appropriate links to private land. A key requirement is the development & implementation of a Fire Protection Plan (FPP) for each fire district in Victoria.

The purpose of a Fire Protection Plan is to ensure that proper and sufficient works for the prevention and suppression of wildfire on public land are undertaken within every Victorian Fire District. The plan is strategic in its approach, addressing fire protection at the regional level, and has a life span of 10 years.

The Mildura Fire District covers the far north west of Victoria and is one of the two fire districts in the North West Region. It contains almost 1,708,000 hectares of public land, which is 41% of the total district (almost 4,105 000 ha). Refer to map 2.



Map 2 – DSE Fire Regions and Fire Districts.

Public land within the District is mainly concentrated in two large areas, one including the Big Desert Wilderness Park, Big Desert State Forest and Wyperfeld National Park and the other including Murray-Sunset national Park and Hattah-Kulkyne national Park. There are many other blocks of public land scattered throughout the fire district.

In the past, the development and review of FPPs only involved the community during the formal eight week consultation period, when a draft document was presented for comment.

The Mildura District Fire Protection Plan (MDFPP) is currently under review. The review commenced in 2003, a community engagement strategy was then developed in 2004, identifying that community engagement is a key component of the review process. Figure 2 outlines the engagement steps undertaken to date. A number of outside events also impacted on the review, including the campaign fires of 2006 – 2007, Fire Code review, and the proposed Nowingi waste containment facility debate.

A reference group consisting of land managers, fire management and Country Fire Authority (CFA) representatives was formed to oversee the review process. As part of the community engagement strategy 18 stakeholder groups were identified and their level of engagement defined by the reference group. This was determined by the amount of impact and influence they each have on the review process. Figure 3 outlines the engagement levels, key stakeholders and tools utilised during the review.

**Key learning’s**

An evaluation of the community engagement is currently underway to enable key learning to be documented and shared. Initial indications are that the additional opportunities for community involvement throughout the process enabled:

- the stakeholders to be better informed and educated about the plan and process
- changes in the plan to better reflect all stakeholders inputs (community engagement is not seen as tokenistic at end – too late, already signed off etc)
- an overall acceptance by stakeholders of the principals behind the plan.

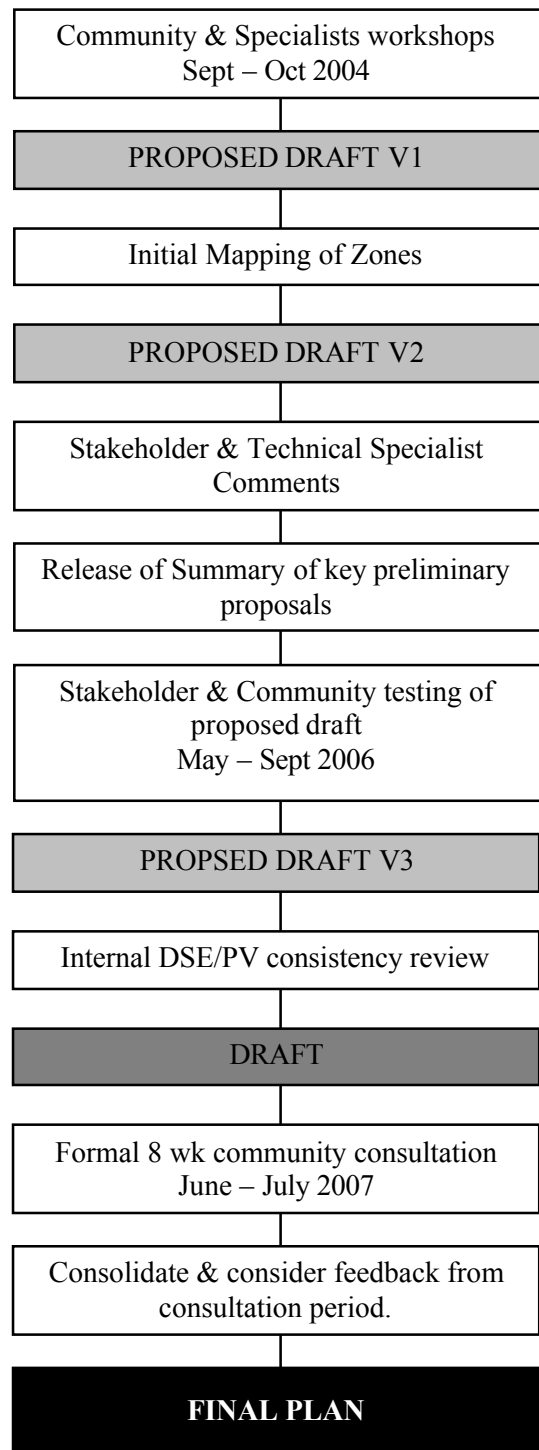


Figure 2 – MDFPP Engagement Steps

This case study demonstrates the many engagement objectives within the strategy, including:

*“To involve the community in collecting data about fire on public land and understanding issues, risks and opportunities for prevention”*

(p24, DSE 2005)

**Figure 3 – MDFPP engagement levels, key stakeholders & tools.**

<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>
Media General Public Environmental groups Committees of management Local politicians Staff Educational institutions	VFF Industries Environmental Groups CFA - brigades	Govt Agencies Shires Landowners Indigenous groups Interstate agencies Environmental groups	CFA – region Land managers	Fire management officer
<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>
Media Releases Posters Newsletters Website	Websites Media Releases Posters Newsletters Big Desert Fire Conference Meetings	Meetings One-on-One Meeting Email Telephone Site visit Maps Big Desert Fire Conference	Reference Team Meetings One-on-one meeting Email Telephone conference/individual Maps Briefings Big Desert Fire Conference	Briefing One-on-one meeting

## **CASE STUDY 2**

### **PREPAREDNESS: EAST PORT PHILLIP FIRE OPERATIONS PLAN CASE STUDY**

Fire Operations Plans are developed under the guidance of the Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land (DSE, Revision 1, 2006). This Code provides the guidelines for the conduct of all fire management activities undertaken by DSE.

The Fire Operations Plan (FOP) is an annual process whereby each DSE Fire District in consultation with internal and external stakeholders plans fire preparedness activities as follows:

- Annual firebreak construction or maintenance
- Construction of new fire access tracks
- Prescribed burning
- Community Engagement activities

Inevitably the most contentious of these activities is prescribed burning and as a result the planning of this receives the most attention from the community.

The East Port Phillip Fire District is located to the immediate east of Melbourne covering areas such as the Mornington Peninsular, Dandenong Ranges and Yarra Valley. Significant areas of the public land estate in this district include State Parks, National Parks, State Forests and Flora and Fauna Reserves. See map 2.

In many cases these areas of park and forest directly abut townships or suburban boundaries. In places such as Arthur's Seat on the Mornington Peninsular and in the Dandenong Ranges the nature of the park is quite fragmented where some communities are surrounded by the park in addition to the high density suburban population abutting the park perimeter.

The FOP has standard guidelines for the planning process to ensure consistency across all fire districts. This includes the timeframes for community consultation. Traditionally the FOP cycle commences in April, seeking nominations for burns and works, and concludes with the sign off of the FOP by the 30<sup>th</sup> September each year. The majority of the stakeholders engaged were internal to DSE.

A pilot project has been set up for the East Port Phillip Fire Operations Plan looking at extending these timelines, participants and level of engagement in the process.

For the purposes of the FOP in East Port Phillip District stakeholders have been divided into four different groups based on their interest and ability to be involved in the process. Figure 4 provides a summary of the stakeholders and their FOP engagement relationships.

Internal stakeholders include land managers such as PV and Melbourne Water (MW), and internal DSE business' such as Flora & Fauna, who are an important link to integrating fire management with other land management objectives. This group is engaged from the nominations phase.

External stakeholders with a high level of interest in the outcomes of the FOP coupled with a good understanding of the process and structure that underpins decision making include the CFA at both local and regional levels, Municipalities, local indigenous communities, Catchment Management Authorities, some friends groups volunteering in parks and a number of community groups and associations that take an interest in all aspects of their local area. This group is also engaged from the nominations phase.

External stakeholders with a high interest level, but low understanding of the process and structure include public land neighbours, a broad range of community groups and associations, environment and friends groups, leasee's and licence holders on Public Land and sections of the tourist industry. This group is engaged during the public comment period.

The last group are external stakeholders who have only a passing interest in the FOP or are only interested in the outcomes rather than being involved in the process. This includes residents in the adjacent suburbs to many of the park areas in East Port Phillip, schools and their associated communities and recreational user groups. This group is only actively engaged once the FOP has been signed off.

The methods of engagement used throughout the Fire Operations Plan process in East Port Phillip vary depending on the audiences as discussed above and the stage in the FOP process that the engagement is being undertaken.

### **Key learning's**

The identification of appropriate stakeholder engagement during the FOP process has allowed a 365 day approach to fire management. This has enabled feedback and suggestions to be taken throughout the year and fed into the nominations process.

The involvement of other stakeholders in the FOPs process has allowed issues and solutions to be identified which may otherwise have been over looked.

Figure 4 – Summary of FOP engagement relationships.

<b>FOP Phase</b>	<b>Nominations</b>		<b>Draft</b>	<b>Final</b>
<b>Audience</b>	Internal	External – Interested and skilled	External – Interested and unskilled	External – Passing Interest
<b>IAP2 Spectrum</b>	<b>Collaborate</b>	<b>Involve</b>	<b>Consult</b>	<b>Inform</b>
<b>Engagement Methods</b>	1:1 contact with Fire Staff	Direct Mail Group Presentations Personal Contact	Direct Mail Media Group Presentations Personal Contact Public Notices Web Posters & Displays	Public Notices Web E-Mail Media Posters Prescribed Burns notifications & information Community events & displays Web 365 day activities

This case study demonstrates the many engagement objectives within the strategy, including:

*“To incorporate local knowledge into preparedness strategies and seek feedback about Fire Protection Plans (FPPs) and Fire Operation Plans (FOPs).”*

(p24, DSE 2005)

### **CASE STUDY 3**

#### **RESPONSE: COMMUNITY MEETINGS (GREAT DIVIDE FIRES)**

After the 2002/2003 Victorian Bushfires, the Victorian Bush Fire Inquiry was established to look into all aspects of wildfire management in Victoria, and to identify and further improve the states ability to prevent, mitigate and respond to wildfire. Many recommendations were made in the resulting document *‘Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires’* (DPC 2003).

Chapters 23 and 24 of the report; Communication with the Community, and Social, Business and Environmental Recovery, have a minimum of 11 recommendations (DPC 2003) relating to the provision of information during the response phase of fire management.

During the response phase of fire management, community engagement plays a vital part in allowing communities to make informed decisions about their ability to stay and defend their assets against the fire risk, or to leave early. It also informs the wider community and stakeholders about the situation, keeping them informed so they too can make decisions about the impact the fire may have on their planned activities, relatives etc.

The public, particularly those directly affected or at risk of the fire, are expecting and actively seeking more specific and up to date information about the fire risk. The decision to ‘Stay or Go’ is directly influenced in many instances by information provided by the fire fighting agency.

In particular, community meetings have become a popular format of delivering vital information to a large number of people at once. They also provide a format for individuals to ask questions, talk with others in the same situation, and provide local information or feedback to those managing the fire.

The majority of the meetings run during the Great Divide Fires in Victoria 2006/2007 were jointly organised by the CFA, and DSE. To ensure most issues could be addressed, they were often attended by other agency staff such as Victoria Police, Department of Human Services (DHS), local government and water authorities.

To enable a single community meeting to be held, and ensure all bases are covered, key stakeholders need to be engaged behind the scenes before the final product is delivered. Figure 5 is an example of a basic engagement plan adapted from the experiences of information units in North East Victoria during the Great Divide Fires 2006/2007.

Figure 5 - Example Engagement Plan for Organising Community Meeting (not the meeting itself).

<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Stakeholders</b>
Media ICC Reception Victorian Bushfire Information Line Customer Information Centres General Public Target Audience/participants	Catchment Management Authority ECC (DSE) SECC (CFA) Venue VicRoads Utilities SES	Operations Officer Planning Officer Logistics Officer CFA Brigade (communications Officer) GIS Support Officer IFACC Parks Victoria Local Community Leaders Key community information providers (eg tourist information centres)	Information Unit CFA Community Fire Safety Officer Victoria Police Municipal Emergency Response Officer Municipal Emergency coordination Centre	Incident controller
<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>	<b>Tools:</b>
Stakeholder Database Media Releases Radio broadcasts (ABC radio) Signage Newsletters/brochures Website Request forms/templates Telephone conversation Email	Briefing Teleconference/conversations Websites	Briefing One-on-One Meeting Email Telephone conference/individual Site visit Maps Fire Maps Fire Predications Potential Impact zones	Team Meetings One-on-one meeting Email Telephone conference/individual Maps Briefings	Briefing One-on-one meeting

Whilst engaging with the above stakeholders, a number of factors need to be considered:

- Location – safe location, close to the affected community & easy to access
- Time – suitable time to enable as many attendees as possible
- Coordinated information – response agencies need to use agreed messages and techniques
- Quality of information

- Meeting notification – who, what, when, where & how
- Possible physical or social barriers
- Purpose and parameters of the meeting – what the meetings are/aren't about
- Presenters – their credibility, knowledge & understanding of the incident and the area
- Anticipate community response to information provided
- Logistics, eg. transport, equipment
- What information the community can provide the Incident Management Team (IMT).

### **Key learning's**

Once a system for organising meetings had been established,

- The high turn over of people representing key stakeholders only minimally affected the organisation of the community meetings
- This cut down the lead time required by Information Units to arrange meetings,
- People understood what was required of them to enable the most up to date information to be passed onto the community at these meetings.
- Such a structure also allowed each meeting and the tasks undertaken to organise them, to be evaluated quickly, so changes could be made readily and successfully.

This case study demonstrates the many engagement objectives within the strategy, including:

*“To work alongside partner agencies in Incident Management Teams to make joint decisions.”*

and

*“Communities respond and implement personal fire plan as part of response to improve outcomes during a wildfire.”*

(p25, DSE 2005)

## **CASE STUDY 4 RECOVERY: GRAMPIANS WILDFIRE 2006**

The recovery phase of a major wildfire incident presents a range of complex issues. The rehabilitation of the natural environment and the return of visitor facilities to the park or forest is an obvious priority. Meanwhile local economy suffers; businesses that relied on the park or forest for their livelihood are greatly impacted, and the sheer physical scar on the landscape is a constant visual reminder of the fear and vulnerability and loss caused by the incident.

Following the Grampians Wildfire (2006) the approach to community engagement employed two specific strategies. One was to provide a support team to facilitate the planning and delivery of community engagement around the fire recovery activities. The second was to build staff capacity to adequately support them to understand the processes of community response to disaster, and enable them to tailor engagement processes to meet the emerging needs of a post disaster community. This case study will focus on the second strategy.

The scope of engagement required around the Grampians Fire recovery was extensive. Grampians National Park contributes millions of dollars in direct tourism expenditure, and has significant Aboriginal and European cultural heritage and environmental values, and strong place attachment by communities living in and around the park. The extensive range of stakeholders required a strategic approach to engagement.

Recognising that the relationships and networks held by local people is the most valuable commodity in engagement; a Community Engagement Support Team was created to provide expertise in supporting the planning and coordination of community engagement activities. The team provided facilitation assistance, general encouragement and advice and a feedback loop for staff to express their frustrations, concerns and successes around their engagement activities.

Entering into the recovery phase of a major fire also brings the added complexity of the psychological effects of traumatic incidents on both staff and the community, greatly affecting their capacity to engage in recovery activities. Supporting social recovery is an area generally outside of the scope of natural resource managers and normally addressed at the municipal level.

However in a situation such as the Grampians wildfire, in which the rehabilitation of the park is so intrinsically linked with the capacity of the community, it became more important for staff to understand how to engage with trauma affected communities. In addition, the competing roles of being a resident, emergency response professional and recovery coordinators placed a greater need for staff to understand their own responses to incidents and how this was impacting on their work.

The Community Engagement Support Team collaborated with DHS to provide specialised advice to staff in community response to disaster through renowned psychologist and consultant to Emergency Management Victoria Dr Rob Gordon. In May 2006 a multi-agency workshop was attended participants from Department of Primary Industries (DPI), DHS, DSE, PV,CFA, local government, local community health networks and local tourism associations to introduce the fundamentals of human response to disaster.

The workshop allowed participants to understand their own personal reaction and better understanding how to engage with a community affected by trauma. Key principles taken away by the participants included:

1. Re-connect contact – incidents have a way of making people feel isolated, physically, emotionally or through lack of information. Establish personal contact to invite people back into the relationship.
2. Reduce arousal – any opportunity for people to share experiences must precede engagement. People cannot listen until they feel that they have been listened to. It is through the process of talking that the brain sorts and deals with feelings, experiences etc.
3. Factual precise information – have correct information, with lots of relevant details. Keep it complex, so people get a picture of how difficult the decisions were, but clear and repeat it often
4. Anger and fear are normal responses to trauma and loss - Acknowledge and accept that people's emotions and concerns are real to them without judgement.
5. Try to utilise pre-incident communication networks to avoid further social reorganisation that happens with emergencies and can be disruptive to long term community recovery.

### **Key learning's**

- More broadly the key learning's for the support team was in simply revisiting the fundamental principles of good facilitation; good listening, know your audience and honour local processes.
- Pre incident staff had extremely strong networks in the community and committed themselves to maintaining these relationships as a priority to all park recovery works.
- Taking a variety of engagement mechanisms to the community, including workshops, field trips, and local employment opportunities catered for engaging the community "*where they were at*".
- All facilitated engagement incorporated "*checking in*" on community participants – to assess their current level of personal recovery and their ability to participate in the engagement at hand. Staff regularly undertook informal "chats" within their own networks to listen to community concerns and communicate information about the recovery.
- The two most significant learnings were:
  1. understanding the process of community response to disaster, and applying suitable community engagement measures support social recovery.

2. Identifying the importance in supporting staff's personal recovery, and the impact on recovery activities and their relationship with the community.

This case study demonstrates the many engagement objectives within the strategy, including:

*“To build partnerships to support community recovery including agricultural re-establishment, rehabilitation of the environment and communities after fire (make decision together as much as possible within legislative constraints).”*

(p25, DSE 2005)

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## **Conclusion**

As part of an on going evaluation of the strategy “*Community Engagement about Fire on Public Land*” (DSE 2005), a recent review of community engagement within fire DSE fire management was undertaken. The review included interviews with staff (primarily regional fire managers and fire management officers), and one focus group in each of the five DSE regions (involving staff from within and outside the fire agencies). Five themes were investigated:

- What was working well
- What wasn't working well
- Key changes in community engagement
- The impact of the changes on the fire program, and
- Areas for improvement.

The review demonstrated that whilst community engagement has always been a part of DSE fire business, many staff have gained greater knowledge and appreciation of what community engagement involves, and the value of engaging stakeholders and community through the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery streams of fire management.

Staffs greater understanding and knowledge of community engagement has lead to improved planning and structured engagement activities. More detailed engagement planning has contributed to broader and more open processes for engaging stakeholder groups and the wider community. Engagement now occurs earlier in the planning process, enabling concerns to be better understood and addressed before the plan is finalised. This has not only created less anguish in the community about projects, but in some cases leads to better working relationships with the community.

The message from staff is while the community may not always agree with our practices; there is increasing knowledge among the key stakeholders about why and how we undertake our business. This more planned approach to information and engagement has also been felt during response, with information units now considered a key aspect of Incident Management Teams.

Looking to the future, it is pleasing to note that DSEs efforts to improve community engagement within the fire program have been recognised by staff as an important driver of the many positive changes that have occurred with stakeholders and the community.

This is especially positive in the face of the uncertainty of climate change and predictions of more fires. DSE is working towards greater understanding of community values, commitment to knowledge and further opportunities for learning together about fire.

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

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