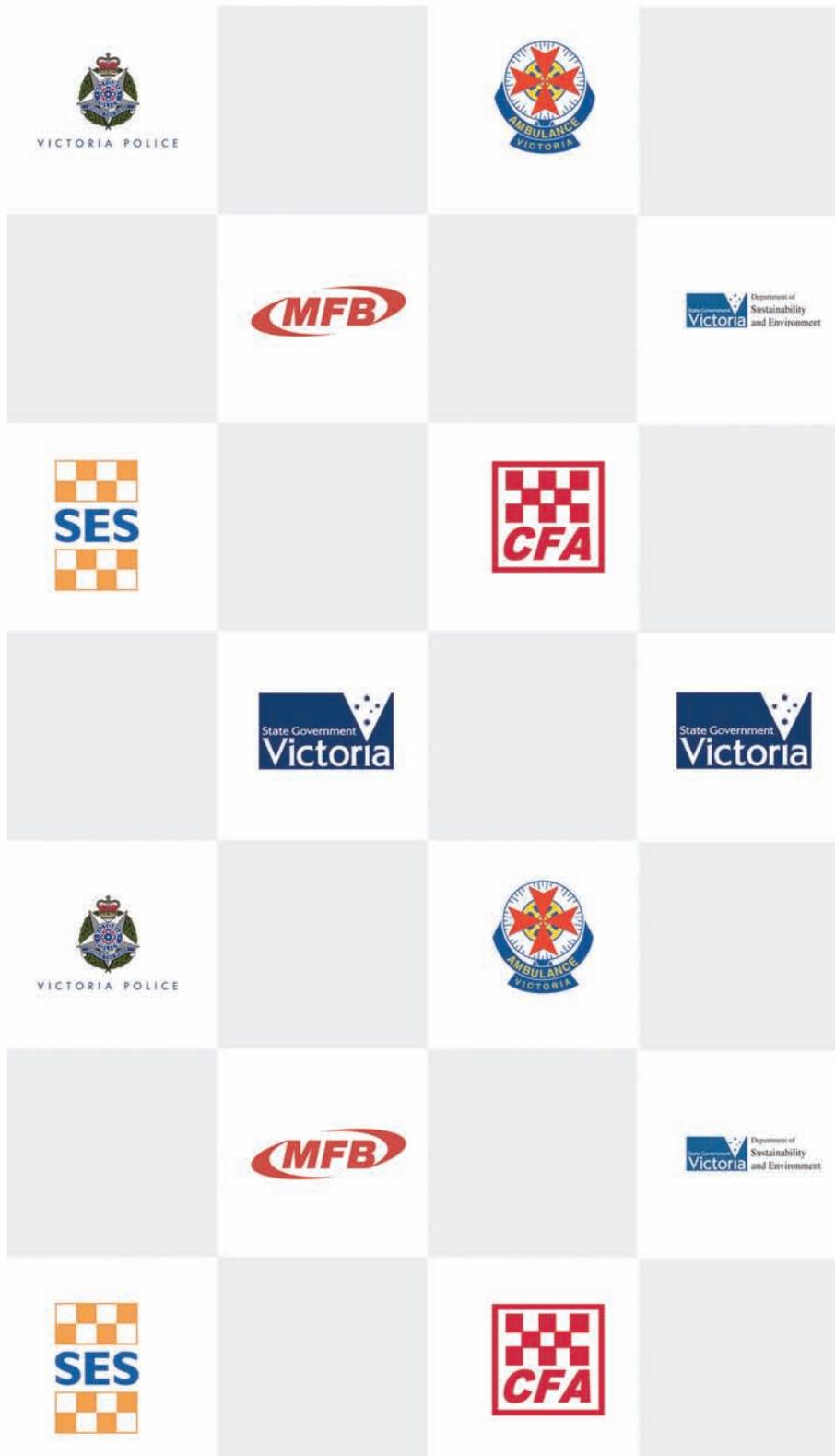


Standard Emergency Warning Signal



The Standard Emergency Warning Signal and guidelines for its use in Victoria

BACKGROUND

In 1999, an agreement was reached between all States and Territories on the need for a Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) to be used in assisting the delivery of public warnings and messages for major emergencies.

The signal to be used for the SEWS is the existing Bureau of Meteorology tropical cyclone warning signal.

The State and Territories further agreed to accept responsibility for the preparation and implementation of procedures related to the use of SEWS in each jurisdiction and to develop and conduct appropriate public awareness programmes.

Victoria endorsed this approach.

The 2009 fires in Victoria resulted in the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, whereby further recommendations were made for the use of SEWS. Victoria is particularly vulnerable to fire and the Royal Commission recommendations have been incorporated into these procedures.

SEWS may be broadcast immediately before an emergency warning or group of warnings for an emergency, or threat of an emergency, including:

- major fires
- major floods
- major severe storms and their associated storm surges
- earthquakes
- chemical hazards and any associated major pollution, or
- any other significant emergency.

The signal may be occasionally broadcast as a test message. Any test of the signal will be announced prior to and after the signal.

PURPOSE OF SEWS

SEWS is designed to:

- alert the public via a media announcement that an official emergency announcement is about to be made concerning an actual or potential emergency which has the potential to affect them, and
- alert the community at large, via a public address system, that an important official emergency announcement is about to be broadcast.

It should be noted that there is a set of *National Guidelines for the Request and Broadcast of Emergency Public Warnings*, which has been developed in consultation with States and Territories and media outlets for the broadcast of emergency warnings.

The guidelines state that “an incident may require the activation of SEWS. Should this occur then the SEWS guidelines supersede the Guidelines for Broadcast of Emergency Public Warnings”

The content and format of the announcement which **follows** the SEWS must:

- be simple, arresting and brief
- consist of clear language and avoid euphemisms
- contain explicit information
- be suited to the needs of the potentially affected community
- be worded in accordance with advice from the relevant agencies, and
- utilise appropriate guidelines provided in the Victorian Warning Protocol.

The national SEWS guidelines can be found at www.ag.gov.au on the Internet.

IMPORTANT: IT IS VITAL THAT THE IMPACT OF THE WARNING SIGNAL BE PRESERVED BY ENSURING THAT IT IS USED ONLY FOR EMERGENCIES OF MAJOR COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE.

OVERUSE OF SEWS

The overuse of SEWS can diminish its effectiveness. SEWS is not intended for use as an alert for general news, editorial comment or the dissemination of general emergency preparedness messages. Whilst the SEWS is for all hazards, in the event of fires, where the incident controller must ensure the signal is only broadcast before warnings about life-threatening fires and, on extreme days, the frequency of its use is limited so as not to undermine the effectiveness of warning.

THREE LEVELS OF WARNING

There are three distinct levels of alerts which are to be utilised for community warnings within Victoria.

Advice	There is no immediate danger. General information to keep you up-to-date with developments. SEWS must not be used.
Watch	It is likely that you may be impacted by the emergency. You may be in danger and <u>should</u> start taking action to protect your life and your family. SEWS must not be used.
Emergency Warning	You will be impacted by the emergency. You are in danger and <u>must</u> take action immediately. This message will usually be preceded by the Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS).

The SEWS should only be used for the **Emergency Warning** category of warning.

Where there are a high number of warnings happening concurrently, or very close together, SEWS should be played before each **group** of warnings. This decision is made by the Incident Controller when a group of warnings is for an incident under his/her control. This decision can also be made at an Emergency Response Controller (ERC) level when a group of warnings occur across areas of operation.

IMPORTANT: EMERGENCY WARNING NOTICES ARE NOT TO BE CONSTRUED AS EVACUATION NOTICES.

AUTHORISATION OF SEWS

The decision to use SEWS rests with the Incident Controller. This is reflected in and supports the provisions of the Emergency Management Manual Victoria, Part 3, and is also governed by the Victorian Warning Protocols.

EMERGENCY WARNING MESSAGES

Emergency Warning templates will be used to ensure that uniform warnings are broadcast. A new computer system has been implemented for the 2009/2010 fire season, whereby automated templates are generated regarding fire. This technology will be migrated to all hazards but at this point in time that technology is not available.

Agencies are encouraged to have pre-planned message templates to assist in the timely development and dissemination of warnings to the community. Telephony warning message templates are found in the Victorian Warning Protocols and reflect a common language for all hazards.

The operational application requires information to be compiled and supplied by the incident controller, for compilation of the appropriate notice. The incident controller will then arrange for the notice to be forwarded to the relevant media outlets.

The duration of the SEWS sound should be no more than 10 seconds. The incident controller can vary the duration of this signal depending on the circumstances of the emergency and the method by which the emergency warning message is to be delivered.

The primary responsibility for issuing information and warnings to the community lies with the Incident Controller, and in the event that he/she is unable to do so, the subsequent tiers of the control agency and then the State Controller.

The relevant control agency is to ensure that a copy of SEWS is made available to all local media outlets – this is available in digital form and can be emailed to the media outlet. After hours contacts for media outlets should be checked before they are required during an emergency. In addition, a check with local media outlets to ensure that they have the SEWS signal should be conducted at this point.

Control agencies are to ensure that they liaise with relevant stakeholder and support agencies, utilising an Emergency Management Team where appropriate, that includes regular and timely information sharing with the State Controller. The Incident Controller (or representative) shall ensure where practicable that the Control Agency command, the supporting agency commanders for the incident and the police co-ordinator are notified prior to a SEWS (and subsequent Emergency Warning) being issued.

The appropriate Emergency Warning message will be issued to the media through the Incident Controller's relevant agency. If required, assistance to disseminate the message(s) may be requested via the police liaison officer who will facilitate action through the Police Media Unit.

Agencies, where practicable and feasible, should monitor in real time the effectiveness of the dissemination of the warnings.

The Incident Controller should inform the community that the heightened risk / threat has passed / eased. SEWS is **not** to be used for this purpose.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE MEDIA

There are currently the following Memorandum of Understanding in place with media outlets:

- Memorandum of Understanding – ABC Victoria and Victorian Emergency Services Organisations
- Memorandum of Understanding – Victorian Government and Sky News
- Memorandum of Understanding - Broadcasting of Emergency Information by Commercial Broadcasters in Victoria

These MOUs can be located at the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner's (OESC) web site at www.oesc.vic.gov.au on the Internet. Agencies should ensure relevant personnel are familiar with the MOUs.

On receipt of a formal request to issue a warning, the media are expected to:

- Confirm the message (if in doubt);
- Break into broadcasting to commence the broadcast of the warning (or group of warnings) by playing the SEWS for a maximum of 10 seconds, unless specific duration is requested by the Incident Controller (when SEWS is specifically requested); and
- Broadcast the emergency announcement VERBATIM.

The emergency announcement, preceded by the SEWS, is to be repeated **twice** at approximately a five minute interval, unless requested otherwise by the Incident Controller.

If SEWS has been broadcast for some time and media have not been advised to cease the message at a certain time, they should confirm that it still needs to be played with the Incident Controller.