



Community Alert Sirens

Policy and Guidelines

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Working in conjunction
with Communities,
Government, Agencies
and Business.

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Background

The Victorian Government endorses the use of a range of measures to alert communities to emergencies. It achieves this through a varied approach to alerting. This includes the use of telephony, mobile applications, emergency broadcasts on radio and television, web-based messaging, social networks and individual notification by the emergency services.

Sirens have been used in many circumstances and over many years to warn of danger. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission made recommendations in relation to the use of sirens as a form of community alerting. The public is broadly familiar with the sirens as a warning of emergencies. However, sirens have limitations in terms of audibility, coverage and meaning.

The sole meaning of sounding a siren for community alerting is “seek further information.” A siren signal alone must never be construed as a signal to evacuate or take any other action.

1. Policy

Policy objective

The document provides the policy framework and articulates responsibilities for the use, testing, maintenance and education of the community about the use of sirens to alert Victorian communities to emergencies, in particular bushfires, floods, hazardous material incidents, along with other natural and non-natural disasters.

The policy provides consistency in the application of sirens used for alerting in Victoria of an impending or actual emergency. Sirens may be used as a signal to those in the immediate vicinity of an emergency to seek further information.

Scope

This policy relates to the use of community alert sirens in Victoria in relation to any type of emergency.

The policy, guidelines and the implementation and assessment processes refer to both existing sirens (e.g. CFA, Life Saving Victoria sirens) and to other sirens or similar technology used or intended for use as community alert systems.

The policy is also aimed at maximising the use of the network of existing CFA sirens, which are currently under-utilised assets in many at risk communities, for the purpose of community alerting.

Privately-owned and operated sirens and systems not used for public alerting (e.g. industry sirens) fall outside the scope of this policy.

Use of Sirens for Community Alerting

1. Community alert sirens are any fixed sirens used to alert a community of an emergency that may directly affect that community.
2. When a community alert siren is used, the “message” is by its nature non-specific. Upon hearing a prolonged siren signal, it is the responsibility of individual community members to seek further information regarding the emergency. This information can be sourced from emergency websites (such as VicEmergency), the FireReady App, emergency broadcasters, emergency information lines, or local information from other credible sources including local VICSES, CFA and Victoria Police.
3. A community alert siren, where installed, is one of a range of community warning systems, devices and activities that may be used in an emergency. Other systems include mobile applications, Emergency Alert (the national telephony-based warning system), community-based alerting systems (e.g. telephone trees), emergency broadcasts, door knocking, etc.

4. Community alerting sirens in Victoria, including standards for maintenance and testing, will be managed by CFA on behalf of the State (regardless of whether or not they are CFA assets). CFA should be accorded appropriate access to sites not under its control in order to carry out necessary works and maintenance.

Existing CFA sirens and other existing sirens

5. CFA sirens have traditionally been used to summon volunteers to attend to emergency calls. A secondary function has been to alert local communities of brigade activity. These sirens are becoming an integral part of an all hazards network of community alert sirens across Victoria.
6. All existing fixed CFA sirens may have two purposes:
 - alerting fire brigade members to attend emergency callouts
 - alerting the broader community that they should seek information about an impending or actual threat.
7. Life Saving Victoria has fixed sirens that are traditionally used to warn beachgoers and swimmers of a potential risk, such as a shark. Their message is “leave the water now”. They have not previously had a broader community alerting function.
8. In order to differentiate these uses and to accommodate the variety of sirens types currently in use across Victoria, the length of time for which a siren is sounded indicates the intent of the signal.
9. The signal for community alerting shall entail sounding the siren for a prolonged period of not less than 5 minutes. CFA Sirens used to alert fire brigade members to an emergency turnout shall sound for no longer than 90 seconds.
10. All CFA and Life Saving Victoria sirens shall be available for use for community alerting for all types of emergency. Where a fixed siren is installed but no longer used by a CFA brigade for alerting members to callouts, this siren shall also be made available for use for community alerting.
11. Determination of the use of an existing siren as a community alert siren will be based on consultation between the emergency services and EMV. Once commissioned as a community alert siren, its existence must be inserted in the Municipal Emergency Management Plan.
12. Before commissioning a CFA siren for community alert siren for use, the CFA district operations manager must first satisfy themselves, the relevant brigade has been trained in its operation and testing and the community has been engaged and educated on the purpose and limitations of the community alert siren.
13. The State Control Centre is responsible for remotely monitoring, testing and reporting faults to CFA for rectification.
14. CFA will be responsible for the review and updating of community alert siren operational guidelines, including their publication and maintenance to ensure state wide consistency.

Establishing a new community alerting siren

15. Where no siren exists and a need is identified with support from the community, assessed and approved, a siren may be installed for the purpose of alerting the community.
16. Communities that wish to establish new or additional community alert sirens will need to follow the procedures set out in the attached guidelines.
17. The establishment of community alert sirens must be approved by the respective Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC). Following consideration of local community need and expectations, available infrastructure and other relevant factors, the MEMPC may make a recommendation to CFA and EMV regarding the need for a community alerting siren.
18. Where a community alert siren is deemed necessary and there is no existing infrastructure associated with, for example, a CFA brigade, then other appropriate State infrastructure may be used to install a siren.
19. Sirens should be of a type approved by CFA that can be incorporated into the broader system of emergency warnings.

Activation

20. Activation of a community alert siren must be authorised by an incident controller. This may occur as part of the incident strategy and incident community warning protocol.
21. Community alert sirens must be integrated with the State's broader warnings system. This will ensure that the sirens are activated together with other forms of alerting, providing consistent warning information to the community.
22. A contingent option in exceptional circumstances is manual activation of a community alert siren. This will require the authorisation of the incident controller to ensure the use of a community alert siren is consistent with the incident strategy. An authorised member of the emergency services will carry out the manual operation of a community alert siren (where this is safe and feasible).

Community engagement and education

23. Ongoing engagement activities will be undertaken as part of the State's engagement campaigns in partnership with CFA, VICSES, Life Saving Victoria and other appropriate organisations to educate and inform the Victorian community broadly of:
 - the role to be played by community alert sirens;
 - the meanings attached to the use of CFA or other fixed sirens;
 - how to respond to a siren sound anywhere in Victoria.
24. An internal engagement campaign will be required for emergency agency and organisation members.
25. Specific messaging that embraces interstate and overseas visitors should be considered.

26. Communities will be actively advised of the existence of a community alert siren through notification in the Municipal Emergency Management Plan, Community Information Guides and other local emergency information circulated to the community by CFA, local government and other agencies.

Related documents

The policy and guidelines should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Fire Management Planning Framework, the National Emergency Warning System (NEWS) policies and protocols and the Victorian Warning Protocol, Municipal Emergency Management Plans, emergency services policy and procedures.

Policy Owner

Emergency Management Victoria

Review

EMV will review this policy and guidelines every two years. The policy will also be subject to review as part of the annual review of the Bushfire Safety Policy Framework.

Definitions

CFA siren

A fixed CFA-owned and operated siren, previously only used to alert brigade members to respond to the fire station.

Community alert siren

Any fixed siren used to alert the community to possible danger and to seek further information.

Industry Siren, privately owned

A fixed siren, operating as part of a local system on an industrial site, to alert employees or others on site to an imminent threat.

Other Fixed Emergency Siren

A fixed siren, operating as part of a local system, to provide warning about a threat or emergency (e.g. shark warning siren).

Prolonged siren signal

A continuous signal sounded by a fixed rotary siren or other similar device for five minutes or more.

2. Guidelines for establishing a new community alert siren

Purpose

The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide advice to a community on how to facilitate Community Alert Sirens where no CFA siren or other appropriate infrastructure already exists and where a siren may be an appropriate and necessary warning tool.

The guidelines deal with a range of factors to consider when establishing the need and assessing the requirements. It also covers the governance arrangements and planning processes.

Background

A Community Alert Siren is an additional means of alerting a community to an actual or impending emergency.

A Community Alert Siren is intended to alert the community to seek detailed information about the emergency from any reliable source, such as the emergency services' websites, television, radio, and other forms of social media.

People must make their own informed decisions on protecting their own lives and not rely on receiving a warning by way of siren or other means.

These Guidelines relate to the introduction of new or additional community alert sirens that are not part of the existing network. They provide a three-step process to assist communities in establishing a community alert siren, as follows:

1. Assessment of community need and support,
2. Approvals, and
3. Installation and operation.

Constraints

Sirens will not be effective or appropriate in some communities.

There are a number of environmental factors that limit whether everyone in the community will hear a siren. These include their distance from the siren, topography, vegetation and any adverse weather conditions at the time. There are human factors too that will limit effectiveness, which include precise knowledge of what the siren means, whether it is loud enough to wake people asleep, and any hearing impairments.

As a result, a Community Alert Siren cannot be considered as a stand-alone means of alerting the community; other systems are needed. These can include local interventions such as telephone trees and door knocking, through to the national "Emergency Alert" telephone alerting messaging system.

Criteria

The introduction of a community alert siren must meet the following criteria:

- Acceptance within a broader community-based planning framework.
- Demonstrated support in the community for the introduction of a Community Alert Siren.
- Endorsement by the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC).
- Operation within the overall community alerting process.

- Be referenced in the Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP), and where implemented, the Community Information Guide or Local Incident Management Plan.
- Comply with and be installed in accordance with siren specifications agreed by the emergency services.

Assessment

The following process will assist the community with the introduction of a community alert siren.

Step 1: Establish need

Determine the need for a community alert siren within a broader community based planning framework.

The introduction of a community alert siren must be supported by a genuine need. This includes identification of hazards such as being within a high-risk bushfire area or those included in the local government planning scheme (such as landslip or floodplain areas). A set of guidance questions (Attachment 1) has been developed to assist the process of determining the need for a community siren.

Step 2: Gauge community support

The community members/group seeking to introduce a community alert siren will need to gauge the level of community support for it. A formal community working group, comprising broad representation from the community and local emergency services, is recommended.

Before proceeding to the next step, the community working group will need to provide evidence that there is reasonable initial community support. This could be from local emergency services organisations and police, and letters from community members.

The broader community will require details of the proposal to inform their decision to support (or object to) a community alert siren. Information should include:

- The need for a community alert siren;
- Existing emergency alert systems in the community;
- Known issues or problems with other emergency alerting systems;
- Identification of the community or geographic area being considered as the target area for alerting and
- Suggestions for location of the siren (this will require further analysis should the proposal progress).

A set of guidance questions (Attachment 2) has been developed to assist the process of determining community support for a community alerting siren.

Step 3. Consensus and approvals

Once there is evidence of community support for a community alert siren, a written proposal must be submitted to the Municipal Emergency Management Planning (MEMP) Committee for consideration. The MEMP Committee is appointed by the municipal council under the *Emergency Management Act 1986* and comprises representatives from (but not limited to) the municipal council, CFA, DELWP, Police and Victoria State Emergency Service. Its role is to prepare a MEMP and consider emergency management issues.

The written proposal should include details such as:

- The Community Working Group, and the community they represent;

- A detailed description of the proposal including:
 - Assessment of need
 - Assessment of community support
 - Evidence of initial community support
 - Details of any community issues or objections.

The MEMP Committee will acknowledge receipt of the submission and indicate a timeframe for their assessment.

If the MEMP committee believe the proposal has merit, a MEMP working group comprising relevant representatives from the MEMP committee and community representatives will assess the proposal. This recommended approach is modelled on the municipal council planning permit process.

This process will involve comprehensive consultation with the community to validate the level of community support and manage objections to the proposal including:

- written advice to all property owners (including absentee) and those living and working in the identified area of siren range described in the proposal
- public notices posted at the proposed location of the siren and in the local media
- a process for members of the community to formally register objections to the proposal.

Objections must be in writing and state why they object and how the Community Alert Siren will affect the individual or community.

Funding of Community Alert Sirens

There is limited State funding available for the provision of community alert sirens.

Where a community wishes to itself fund the provision of a community alert siren, it will be necessary for that community to establish a committee of management and an appropriate structure for managing fundraising.

If a community committee of management is established to install a community alert siren, they must apply to be an 'Incorporated Association' and abide by relevant legislation.

'Incorporation' is a system of registration in Victoria that gives a community group certain legal rights in return for accepting certain legal responsibilities. An incorporated association receives recognition as a legal entity separate from its members and offers some protection for office holders from any debts or liabilities incurred by the group as long as the association does not return a profit to its members.

Information must be obtained from Consumer Affairs Victoria to progress an application to incorporate a committee (<http://www.consumer.vic.gov.au>).

At the conclusion of the establishment process, ownership of the siren infrastructure must be assigned to the State of Victoria, which will also assume responsibility for ongoing maintenance of the siren. The local working group will have no further role in the management of the community alerting siren.

A municipal council is under no obligation to fund or manage a Community Alert Siren. However, as the most relevant local authority with legislated responsibilities for emergency management, it should consider providing support in relation to its responsibilities under the *Emergency Management Act*. Support from a municipal council may include funding, the provision of infrastructure, assistance with community engagement or any other assistance appropriate in the establishment of a Community Alert Siren.

The MEMPC must consider the following factors in assessing a proposal for a community alert siren:

- planning requirements/permits
- building and construction standards
- funding arrangements
- acquisition and installation of the system to agreed siren specifications
- community communication and awareness program

Management arrangements for a Community Alert Siren

CFA, on behalf of the State, is responsible for managing the network of sirens used for community alerting state-wide, even though these sirens may not be located on CFA-owned infrastructure.

These guidelines require the MEMP committee to consider any proposal for a new Community Alert Siren and endorse those assessed as having merit. This does not imply any commitment to a future management role.

Changing and improved technology may also influence the continued need for a Community Alert Siren.

Definitions

CFA siren

A fixed CFA-owned and operated siren, generally used to alert brigade members to respond to the fire station.

Community

For the purpose of these guidelines, 'community' means all the people who live, work, visit or own property in the particular locality for which the Community Alert Siren proposal is intended.

Community Alert Siren

Any fixed siren used to alert the community to possible danger and to seek further information.

Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee

A committee is formed pursuant to Section 20(3) & (4) of the *Emergency Management Act 1986*, to formulate and review a MEMP in relation to the prevention of, response to and the recovery from emergencies within the municipal area. It comprises members of council and emergency management agencies/organisation.

Municipal Emergency Management Plan (MEMP)

A plan developed by the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee in accordance with Part 4 of the *Emergency Management Act 1986*, which details the agreed arrangements for the prevention of, the response to, and the recovery from, emergencies that could occur in the municipality.

Attachment 1 Guidance questions to assist in determining community need

1. What hazards (e.g. fire, flood) could impact your community

<input type="checkbox"/>	Designated high risk bushfire area
<input type="checkbox"/>	Coastal inundation or erosion
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bushfire overlay
<input type="checkbox"/>	Erosion or landslip
<input type="checkbox"/>	Floodplain / land subject to inundation / flood-way
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please describe)

2. What community alert systems operate in this community?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Television or radio
<input type="checkbox"/>	CFA brigade siren
<input type="checkbox"/>	Existing community alert siren
<input type="checkbox"/>	Emergency alert system
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agency warning messages
<input type="checkbox"/>	Telephone trees
<input type="checkbox"/>	Door knocking
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mobile phones
<input type="checkbox"/>	Word of mouth
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please describe)

3. Can the existing community alert systems be improved without the introduction of a siren?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

4. What percentage of the community lives within 2 kilometres (general coverage range) of the proposed siren location?

5. How will an alert siren help this community?

Attachment 2 Guidance questions to assist in determining community support

1. Have the following communication activities or consultations been carried out?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Distribution of alert system information
<input type="checkbox"/>	Broad identification of community support
<input type="checkbox"/>	Detailed (MEMP) assessment consultation

2. Is there indicative support for Community Alert Siren?

<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes (describe)

3. Are there community objections to a Community Alert Siren?

<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes (describe)

4. Did the MEMP Committee approve the submission?

<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes

Document information

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Document approval

This document requires the following approval:

Name	Title	Organisation
Craig Lapsley	Emergency Management Commissioner	EMV