



Tasmanian Visitor Information Network Inc.

26th April 2019

Re: Terms of Reference for Independent Review into 2018-19 bushfires

2. The effectiveness of community messaging and warnings

The Tasmanian Visitor Information Network Inc. (TVIN) is a not-for-profit industry association providing services, training and support for 25 visitor centres across the State who all have common goals and values and a shared purpose.

Visitor centres (VICs) generally have been shown to play a critical role in times of emergency and become key response sites for visitors in times of crisis.

During the January 2013 Tasmanian bush fires, VICs around the State were inundated with requests for information on bushfire affected areas from visitors in the State at the time and those proposing to travel. In addition, they played a crucial role in relation to visitors' forward/alternate travel arrangements, redirecting and rebooking visitors whose plans were affected by the bushfires. It was evident at that time that visitors and locals approached a VIC when looking for a trusted source of help.

VICs at that time did the best they could but identified they could perform a more useful role, however to do so they needed to be better prepared, appropriately equipped and have adequate systems in place to be able to provide up-to-date information to visitors on bushfire danger and other weather-related warnings.

The TVIN collaborated with the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) and State Emergency Service, and with assistance of funding from the Natural Disaster Resilience Grants Program, developed a training program and resources building on the existing strengths, capacity and ability within the TVIN to develop the capability of VICs to effectively deliver emergency messaging and educate visitors on bushfires and other emergency events.

Initiatives undertaken included:-

- Education of VIC staff in understanding bushfire messages;
- Inclusion of VICs on the TFS electronic distribution list to receive email advices and updates of bushfire emergencies;
- Development of special emergency signage stands for VICs, along with information cards for promoting days of total fire ban, emergency alerts and warnings in place and fire danger ratings;
- Production of brochures, in English and Mandarin, specifically designed with bushfire messages for visitors including information on bushfire danger ratings, how to stay alert and informed including relevant web sites and ABC radio station frequencies around the State.

The imperative for the project was a duty of care to visitors including interstate and international tourists and Tasmanians out of area.

With over 1 million visits to Tasmanian centres annually VICs have the capacity to engage with a significant number of people who may not otherwise be aware of bushfire and other emergency messaging or familiar with place names, road conditions or geographic locations. Visitors may not be listening to the radio, watching TV, using mobile phones or buying newspapers so normal communication channels may not capture them.

VICs support those areas where a bushfire or other emergency is occurring by disseminating information to visitors across the state who may not otherwise be aware of it, before they find themselves unwittingly caught up in it, or in the case of days of total fire bans, possibly contributing to it. For this reason, the project has a state wide perspective recognising that visitors can cover large areas of the State in any one day.

During January and February this year there were 382,000 visits to visitor centres. Using their knowledge and the specially developed resources staff engaged proactively with visitors promoting days of Total Fire Ban and emergency Alerts and Warnings handing out brochures and displaying notifications along with additional information on the location and status of bushfires and road closures. In addition to the bushfires the impact of smoke also meant that VICs were dealing with requests from visitors for alternate touring suggestions. TFS posts on social media were shared widely. VICs also assisted in promoting messages for people travelling on roads which had been impacted by bushfires on behalf of the Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management.

VICs were able to use their networking capability where the situation was continually changing to direct people to continue to call in to other VICs around the State to check on the status of the fires and road closures. The TVIN was in receipt of regular bulletins from the Department of Premier and Cabinet and VICs also worked closely with the Parks & Wildlife Service updating visitors on the status of walking tracks across the State.

When compared with the situation in 2013 during this year's fires VICs were confident in their ability and knowledge of the situation to keep visitors informed and up-to-date with the changing conditions.

The TVIN and the TFS continue to work closely with the TFS providing pre and post bushfire season briefings each year to all VICs and conducting training workshops for new visitor centre staff.

The TVIN is happy for this information to be made public.

Judy More
Executive Officer