

Preparing for a 'Code Red' day

Ros Handley presents a case study describing Macedon Shire Council's preparations for a 'Code Red' day.

ABSTRACT

The introduction of Fire Danger Ratings in Australia following the devastating bushfires in Victoria on 7 February 2009 – known as Black Saturday, prompted Macedon Ranges Shire Council, in central Victoria, to consider the implications of a 'Code Red' day and prepare its community accordingly.

Fire Danger Ratings were introduced for the 2009/10 summer, together with messages to accompany each level of fire danger. The highest level was Code Red and the corresponding message was that those living in a bushfire-prone area should leave the night before or early in the morning.

The declaration of a 'Code Red' day would particularly affect anyone living, working or travelling in the Macedon, Mt Macedon and Woodend areas - three of the 52 townships that had been identified by the Victorian government as representing the highest fire-risk areas in the state.

The three townships are heavily-treed, picturesque environments, surrounded by rural land and forests. They are located in the centre of the Macedon Ranges Shire, alongside the Calder Freeway and the rail line, which is the corridor for travel between Melbourne and Mildura.

If a Code Red day occurred on a weekend, it was expected that many more residents would be in the area than on a weekday when many commute to work outside of the shire. Being within an hours' drive of Melbourne and Bendigo, the area is also a popular spot for visitors and for those travelling to or from other parts of the state.

On a weekday, the situation was likely to be quite different, with many adult residents out of the area and others travelling to or through the area for work or school.

The Victorian government had declared that a significant number of schools and early childhood services in the Macedon Ranges would close on Code

Red days. This was such a new concept that it was hard to know how many local children and teenagers were likely to be at home on such a day – with or without an adult, how many would stay with friends or relatives for the day, and how many of those friends and relatives would be local or outside of the high risk areas. It highlighted the need for parents to have a plan for their family specifically for Code Red days.

Council's approach to Code Red days

All too aware of the risk and potential impact of bushfires in this area, Macedon Ranges Shire Council made the decision in November 2009 that it would not operate any services or open any facilities in Macedon, Mt Macedon and Woodend from 12 midnight to 12 midnight (24 hours) on Code Red days.

This included services operated in council-owned buildings or facilities by the council, committees of management or other parties, e.g. the neighbourhood house, the library and community centre, as well as recreation reserves and sports facilities, including the Woodend swimming pool and Hanging Rock Reserve.

Other services that would not operate in the three towns included home care, maternal and child health, preschools, immunisation sessions, school crossing supervision, and the Woodend Visitor Information Centre.

Similarly, there would be no outdoor works conducted by council staff in and around those towns on Code Red days.

Issues to consider

Such a move was unprecedented. The decision to close services and facilities on a Code Red day required the council to develop business continuity plans.

It had to consider how many staff – many of whom lived locally, were likely to implement their own household plan and therefore would be unavailable to work on a Code Red day. Some of these staff worked in the council's Kyneton or Gisborne offices, thus affecting the council's operations in locations outside of the three designated high-risk areas.

It required the council to consider how it would redeploy those who normally worked in Woodend, Macedon or Mt Macedon or usually travelled through these areas, and did intend to work on a Code Red day.

Importantly, it also required the council to consider how it would maintain its emergency response, recovery and other essential services.

As difficult as the anticipated logistics appeared, this decision demonstrated just how seriously the risk and potential consequences of bushfire were taken.

Communicating the Code Red day arrangements

In tandem with the decision not to operate services or facilities in the three high-risk towns on Code Red days, was the development of a communication plan.

The aim of the communication plan was to create community awareness of the council's service arrangements on Code Red days, thereby encouraging those who lived, worked or conducted any form of activity in the area to also have a plan for these days.

Target audiences included:

- residents throughout the Macedon Ranges Shire, including those who utilised council services such as home care, maternal and child health services, preschools and immunisation, and facilities such as swimming pools, leisure centres and libraries;
- lessees and users of council facilities – including users of the Kyneton Saleyards and Kyneton Airfield;
- committees of management;
- businesses and contractors operating in the shire, particularly in the three townships designated high-risk;
- agencies, such as local community health centres and aged care providers;
- volunteers, such as those who deliver meals and assist in the operation of council's visitor information centres;
- relevant government departments, neighbouring municipalities and emergency services.

Communication methods included:

- letters to specific groups/service users;
- council's website;
- newspaper advertisements;
- fliers;
- signs/posters;
- media releases/briefings;
- email to ABC Radio (Bendigo and Melbourne);
- community-based newsletters;
- internal newsletters/email/intranet.

Council staff also met face-to-face with clients and other local service providers to encourage them to develop and implement their own fire plans.

These meetings were held with the following types of organisations:

- clients of the council's home care services, including meals-on-wheels clients;
- families with young children;
- schools;
- aged care providers;
- health and welfare agencies;
- tourism and business operators.

There were two stages identified for the council's communications:

- **Stage 1** (at the commencement of the fire season):
Key message: These are the council's plans on a CODE RED day and this is how our services will be affected. Be sure to make your own plan.
- **Stage 2** (when a Code Red day is advised by Bureau of Meteorology)
Key message: Reminder – These are our plans for (date), which is expected to be a CODE RED day. Do you have a plan?

Conclusion

Representing just one component of the Macedon Ranges Shire Council's emergency planning, preparations for Code Red days and the development of related operational and communication plans, addressed an entirely new concept for the Council.

The three towns designated 'high-risk' following Black Saturday are not the only areas at risk of bushfire in the Macedon Ranges Shire. Communities to the north of the shire and neighbouring areas experienced bushfire on Black Saturday that burned close to 10,000 hectares and destroyed homes, property and livestock.

Bushfires also occurred in the 2008/09 summer without the conditions that would now be categorised as a Code Red day. Two bushfires had occurred in the west of the Macedon Ranges Shire and adjoining areas just two to three weeks before Black Saturday, highlighting the need for plans that enable an effective response to bushfire occurring in any location and in weather conditions that may not be considered Code Red.

About the author

At the time of writing, **Ros Handley** was the Communications Officer for Macedon Ranges Shire Council, Victoria, and developed the council's Code Red day communication plan. For several years, she has worked with the council's Emergency Management Staff and representatives of CFA region 14 to communicate bushfire preparedness messages to local communities. Ros is now Project Coordinator – Fire and Emergency Management at the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and can be contacted at rhandley@mav.asn.au.