



Photo by Sharon Quandt

It's your call

By Superintendent Peter McKechnie, State Operations Manager

The information from the fireground is critical to the Service's ability to successfully protect life and property from bush fires. Firefighters and officers hold so much more than the situation at that specific location in their hands.

While you and your crew/s hold hoses or equipment that will potentially save a life or property, you also hold the information that could save the lives and properties of many more people. All this can be contained in a SitRep (Situational Report).

The information in your SitRep about the fire and how it's behaving, where it is going, who it will threaten and what support you need to protect life and property enables the type and scale of support you need to be quickly worked out based on the information you have at hand.

On the following pages you will see a chart visually indicating how the information flows, how your radio call affects decision making by senior incident managers and how your report impacts residents under threat and their safety.

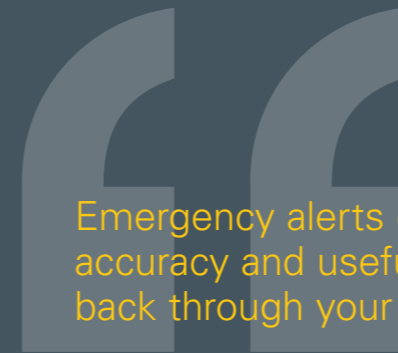
SitRep should be sent by the officer in charge to FIRECOM shortly after arrival at an incident. They should also be sent when any significant objectives have been achieved, when the situation changes and if it is a dynamic environment, about every 30 minutes. If you are a unit working

under another officer in the chain of command (e.g. working under a Sector or Division Commander), you give the SitRep for your patch to them.

The initial SitRep should be combined with (or shortly follow) the 'at scene' or 'approaching scene' call. It should give or confirm the present size, type and location of the incident. It should briefly describe what you think the incident is going to do. It should advise if any people or property is under threat. It should include what action you are taking and what support you

need. It should be noted that when advising that there is a threat it should be as accurate as possible. For example is the threat that the fire will impact and be likely to destroy something? Or alternatively is the fire likely to burn close to properties but crews can deal with the fire as it approaches.

Most fires are small and routine. You get a call, you turn out, size it up and you deal with it and head back to the station. At key times you give radio calls and situation reports (SitRep) to FIRECOM to let them know what's going on.



Emergency alerts often have to be sent out within minutes and their accuracy and usefulness depends heavily on the information coming back through your SitReps

When the SitRep really counts

On bad fire days it can be a very different story. By the time you get to the scene the fire can already be going. It may be threatening people and property, some of whom you can help but some you can't. You may quickly need many more units sent to the right spots to deal with the whole incident, not just where you are. In these situations, it's your SitReps in the early stages that are critical in saving lives and preventing large losses.

Good SitReps enable FIRECOM and Incident Management Teams (IMTs) to know what's going on and develop situational awareness. Having this enables them to quickly plan who needs to be warned, know what you are doing, what help you need and where it's most needed. Without good informative SitReps it's not possible for them to know what's going on and how best to support you and warn the community during a dangerous and rapidly escalating incident.

The information you supply doesn't just go to FIRECOM or an IMT. It also goes to State Operations who when necessary will use it to arrange out-of-area strike teams, air support, heavy plant, Rapid Aerial Response Teams (RARTs), logistical support and telephone / SMS emergency alerts to people threatened by the fire and provide advice via / to the media.

Make it a habit

Giving a detailed, informative and accurate SitRep takes time. It needs to be detailed enough to get the right information across, such as where the fire is and who it is threatening, but not so long that it unnecessarily distracts you from firefighting. Giving a concise yet informative SitRep involves a skill that needs to be practiced and learned.

Training is valuable, but it can only do so much. Getting into the habit of giving good SitReps at routine incidents is the best way of being prepared to give them well at 'the big one'.

When you give a SitRep, the information is used to mark up a map to show where the fire is located and which way it's headed. That enables others in the IMT to establish which communities are in the path of the fire and who needs to be warned, and for units to be sent to where they can do the most good. If information from you is missing, vague or inaccurate, however, that can't happen.

The acronym FTASC has been coined as an aid to remembering all the things you might need to include in a SitRep (or any communication of information up the chain of command, for that matter). It is complemented by the well known SMEACS acronym (Situation, Mission, Execution, Admin / Logistics, Command / Control / Comms, Safety) which outlines information passed down the chain of command).

FTASC stands for:

Fire - Type, location, direction of spread, effects (casualties / losses).

Threats - People and property in the path of the fire or exposed to the fire

Actions - Offensive (direct, parallel, indirect attack), defensive (line, ember or backstop defence), safeguarding (warning, moving or protecting people)

Support - Additional units needed, air support, heavy plant, senior officer, etc

C3 - Command, control and communications arrangements

Here are some typical initial SitReps.

"Firecom, Dargo 1A, on scene Jones Street Dargo, confirmed grass fire with

three metre high flames heading south east, the heel is 500 metres south east of the Johnson Highway with a 100 metre wide head centred at approximate grid 379 428, minor threat to fencing only, making a direct attack with hose-reels off two tankers, no further support needed, we're assuming 'Johnsons Control'"

"Firecom, Calista Pumper, on scene at the intersection of Sydney and Albany Roads, confirmed motor vehicle accident, no fire, two persons trapped, intersection closed, Police, rescue and ambulance on scene, we're providing fire protection with a charged 38mm line, assuming RFS Command at Calista MVA, reporting to Police at scene."

"Firecom, Kindred 1A, on scene, Kindred National Park, confirmed bush fire, heading south east, crowning through tree-tops and approximately 1km from houses with embers currently threatening four properties at western end of Melba Road. This fire is likely to threaten the western outskirts of Kindred Village in approximately 30 minutes, setting up defensive operations in Melba Road, request a total of four tankers to level 1 staging on Melba Road and six tankers to Bornholm Crescent west of Kindred Village, I am assuming 'Melba Control' and request a channel for coordinating units at scene."

Later SitReps can confine themselves to what has changed. Here are some examples:

"Firecom, Johnsons Control, the fire is now under control, no fencing or other property damaged, mopping up for about 30 minutes."

"Firecom, Calista MVA Commander, persons removed from vehicles and transported by ambulance, remaining on standby until vehicle towed, east bound lane now open."

"Firecom, Melba Control, fire front now impacting houses in Melba Road, four tankers on scene doing ember defence, one small shed alight, confident of protecting other property."

Alerting those under threat

Emergency alerts often have to be sent out within minutes and their accuracy and usefulness depends heavily on the information coming back through your SitReps. The software used to transmit emergency alerts has a map onto which the area for the alert is drawn. The more exact that area, the more exact the warning that can be given.

On a bad fire day, when it is clear that an area is under threat, the better you can describe where the fire is located and where it's headed, the better it is for informing people. Better still, if you can outline the area under threat or is likely to be threatened using easy to identify points (like intersections, or bridges or obvious landmarks) the greater is the likelihood that the exactly right people will get exactly the right emergency message.

Here's an example:

"The area likely to be impacted in the next hour or so is bounded by Riverdale Bridge to the transmission tower on Reno Hill, to the corner of the A34 and B132, to the corner of the B132 and B85, and back to Riverdale Bridge."

As you can see the SitRep you give up through the chain of command has great influence on the level of support you receive as well as on the information that is conveyed to the public so that they can make informed decisions that may just save their lives.

It's your call that makes a difference



Within minutes, the information in your SitRep may be the very words used by the Commissioner as he addresses the public through the media.



The Decision to issue an Emergency Warning

When the SitRep from the field indicates the fire is burning out of control and is threatening life and property, the local Fire Control Centre may decide to issue an Emergency Warning according to the Alerts and Warnings Matrix. The decision is based on the accuracy of the SitRep as well as the forecast Fire Danger Rating that day, forecast weather conditions, time to impact and fire behaviour. Once the decision to issue an Emergency Warning is made the Incident Controller calls the 'red phone' at NSW RFS State Operations Centre.

A best practice SitRep follows the F.T.A.S.C formula - Fire, Threat, Action, Support, C3. (see over for more details)

'Red Phone' Conference Call

When the Incident Controller at the local Fire Control Centre calls the 'red phone' a conference call takes place with fire managers, NSW RFS senior leadership and several key units. The situation in the field is clarified to identify what support is required and when. Extra resources and warnings to the community may be triggered by this conference call.



Major Fire Updates on NSW RFS website



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Emergency Alerts



RSS Feeds



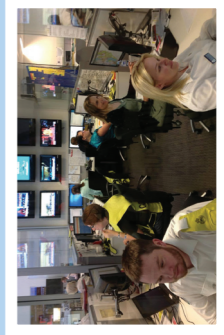
Television



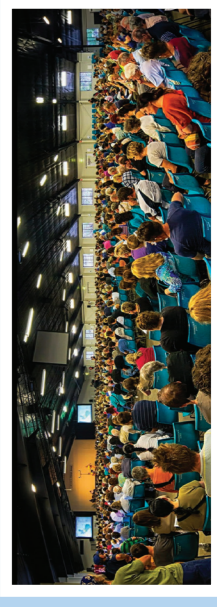
Print and online media



Radio



Public Liaison Unit



Community Meetings

BUSH FIRE INFORMATION LINE
1800 NSW RFS
 1 8 0 0 6 7 9 7 3 7

Bush Fire Information Line