

Government response to the IGEM's report into the West Footscray industrial fire

The illegal storage of combustible waste or dangerous goods poses an unacceptable risk to our firefighters, the community and the environment. The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring the health and wellbeing of the community and all emergency service workers, and to reducing the risk of an incident like the West Footscray industrial fire occurring again.

Overview

The Victorian Government welcomes the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's (IGEM) Report into the West Footscray industrial fire. The Report responds to the request to provide advice on the industrial fire that started on 30 August 2018, specifically addressing the effectiveness of:

- High risk site identification, planning and preparedness;
- Roles and responsibilities of response agencies and support agencies; and
- Community information and warnings, including the use of Emergency Alert.

The West Footscray industrial fire was a challenging and complex incident requiring significant efforts from the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) and the broader emergency management sector. At the height of the fire, more than 140 firefighters were on scene battling the blaze. The MFB worked closely with the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and other agencies to minimise impacts to the community, including the environmental impacts.

Since the West Footscray industrial fire, the Government has also:

(a) *Established the Dangerous Goods and Waste Crime Oversight Group* - which aims to reduce instances of stockpiling and criminal exploitation of the waste market, ultimately increasing regulatory compliance and reducing risks to firefighters, the community and environment. The Group oversees inter-agency collaboration on identification, inspection and management of high-risk sites, and a comprehensive work program which includes:

- The development and implementation of a Coordinated whole of Government Prevention and Response Framework for Dangerous Goods and Waste Crime, to clearly define roles and responsibilities of agencies, including fire agencies and regulators, relating to the identification, inspection and management of high-risk and hazardous waste sites.
- An integrated intelligence sharing tool to enhance the identification, investigation and management of high-risk sites, supporting the collection and analysis of shared intelligence and input into risk assessments for sites.

(b) *Introduced legislative reforms to ensure those responsible for putting the community at risk face serious consequences* – which include:

- The creation of a new offence that will see prison terms of up to ten years for those that recklessly engage in the manufacture, storage, transport, transfer, sale or use of dangerous goods in a way that places, or may place, a person in danger of death
- Increase in penalties for endangering health and safety, property or the environment as well as failing to comply with a direction of a WorkSafe Inspector or with duties imposed by the *Dangerous Goods Act 1985*.

The Government supports IGEM's recommendations in full and the Government's commitment to respond is detailed below.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA) consider the early escalation of incident management arrangements for fires involving dangerous goods. Response levels, management coordination and control centres can all be scaled down as appropriate.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE – SUPPORT IN FULL

Escalation from incident to regional or state tier arrangements for major emergencies is based on criteria detailed in the State Emergency Response Plan (section 4).

Fire services respond to a structure fire plan and undertake actions to suppress the fire and minimise consequences based on what is known at a given time. Early escalation of incident management arrangements for fires involving dangerous goods can only be reasonably considered in relation to available intelligence. It is imperative that incident management be undertaken with regard to the strategic context and the broader consequences and impacts of the incident, identifying and working across agencies as required.

An integrated intelligence sharing tool to aid in the identification, investigation and management of high-risk sites is a key output of the Government's Dangerous Goods and Waste Crimes Oversight Group. Intelligence sharing will be supported by an integrated gathering repository and reporting system, and the responsible Intelligence Committee will produce monthly reports on risks and emerging issues relating to high risk sites. Increased sharing of intelligence across agencies, including regulatory agencies, will enable more effective and efficient assessment of risk that underpins the decision to escalate incident management arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that MFB strengthen its communications during a developing incident to provide support agencies with timely and accurate incident information to:

- *Ensure early sector wide situational awareness during a developing incident to facilitate organisational readiness*
- *Ensure appropriate representation at incident and regional emergency management teams*
- *Facilitate communication flow across and through the line-of-control.*

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE – SUPPORT IN FULL

The government recognises the benefits of early communication to support agencies regarding situational awareness during a developing incident in providing greater clarity about their role and assisting in organisational readiness.

MFB communications with support agencies for Class 1 (major) emergencies should be consistent with the communications procedures and systems used for other major emergencies. Incident controllers activate support agencies to undertake their roles and responsibilities in relation to potential impacts and consequences, in consultation with incident management teams. The roles and functions of agencies for supporting emergency response management are outlined in Part 7 of the Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMMV). This EMMV part is currently under review as a component of the new State Emergency Management Plan, under the Emergency Management Legislation Amendment Act 2018. EMV will work with MFB to ensure that established communication procedures are incorporated into relevant doctrine and operating practices.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends support agencies (including the Environment Protection Authority Victoria and Melbourne Water) ensure they have adequate access to personal protective equipment in line with their roles and responsibilities for incidents involving hazardous materials, making specific consideration for longer duration events.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE – SUPPORT IN FULL

The provision and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is an important occupational health and safety issue and all agencies need to ensure that staff have adequate access to appropriate PPE.

The Environment Protection Authority has already implemented new hazardous environment procedures, which includes new training and PPE procedures. The Environment Protection Authority is now able to operate more safely in contaminated and potentially hazardous environments to undertake monitoring and sampling in the community for short and long duration events. Melbourne Water is also taking active steps to ensure that all staff have access to PPE.

The fire agencies (MFB and CFA) can also provide advice to support agencies regarding the type of PPE needed for the management of hazardous materials.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management recommends that Emergency Management Victoria coordinate a review of the use of the Emergency Alert system in circumstances beyond the immediate threat to life. The review should consider how the system could be used to inform the impacted community of the emerging event and how to source information without compromising its effectiveness in life-threatening situations.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE – SUPPORT IN FULL

The Emergency Alert system is Victoria's key system for providing public information in an emergency. Its use is guided by operational procedures (JSOP JO4.01), which provides guidance to control and support agencies regarding the provision of public information and warnings.

JSOP JO4.01 supports the use of the Emergency Alert system where life is not directly under threat, and therefore has broader utility in keeping the community safer and more informed. EMV has undertaken a review to ensure that JSOP JO4.01 is consistently reflected in other operational guidance materials.