

# GUIDELINES FOR USING THE STANDARD EMERGENCY WARNING SIGNAL IN VICTORIA



## BACKGROUND

In 1999, all Australian States and Territories agreed on the need for a Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) to be used in assisting the delivery of public warnings and messages for major emergencies.

The national SEWS guidelines can be found at [www.aq.gov.au](http://www.aq.gov.au)

In 2007 a set of National Guidelines was developed in consultation with States and Territories and media outlets for the *Request and Broadcast of Emergency Public Warnings*.

Specific guidelines for the broadcast of emergency information in Victoria are outlined in the *Practice Note for Emergency Broadcasting in Victoria*.

The State and Territories further agreed to accept responsibility for the preparation and implementation of procedures related to the use of SEWS in each jurisdiction and to develop and conduct appropriate public awareness programmes.

Victoria endorsed this and this document outlines the agreed approach.

## USE OF SEWS

SEWS is just one aspect of providing information to the community during an emergency.

SEWS is designed to:

- alert the public via a media announcement that an official emergency announcement is about to be made concerning an actual or potential emergency which has the potential to affect them, and
- alert the community at large, via a public address system, that an important official emergency announcement is about to be broadcast.

The signal to be used for the SEWS is the existing Bureau of Meteorology tropical cyclone warning signal.



The duration of the SEWS sound should be no more than 10 seconds. The incident controller can vary the duration of this signal depending on the circumstances of the emergency and the method by which the emergency warning message is to be delivered.

SEWS may be broadcast immediately before an emergency warning or group of warnings for an emergency, or threat of an emergency, including:

- major fires
- major floods
- major severe storms and their associated storm surges
- earthquakes
- chemical hazards and any associated major pollution
- any other significant emergency

The content and format of the announcement which follows the SEWS must:

- be simple, arresting and brief
- consist of clear language and avoid euphemisms
- contain explicit information
- be suited to the needs of the potentially affected community
- be worded in accordance with advice from the relevant agencies, and
- utilise appropriate guidelines provided in the Victorian Warning Protocol

The signal may be occasionally broadcast as a test message. Any test of the signal will be announced prior to and after the signal.

## OVERUSE OF SEWS

The overuse of SEWS can diminish its effectiveness. SEWS is not intended for use as an alert for general news, editorial comment or the dissemination of general emergency preparedness messages. Whilst the SEWS is for all hazards, in the event of fires, where the Incident Controller must ensure the signal is only broadcast before warnings about life-threatening fires and, on extreme days, the frequency of its use is limited so as not to undermine the effectiveness of warning.

**IMPORTANT: IT IS VITAL THAT THE IMPACT OF THE WARNING SIGNAL BE PRESERVED BY ENSURING THAT IT IS USED ONLY FOR EMERGENCIES OF MAJOR COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE.**

## AUTHORISATION OF SEWS

In Victoria, the primary responsibility for issuing information and warnings to the community lies with the Incident Controller, and in the event that he/she is unable to do so, the subsequent tiers of the control agency and then the State Response Controller.

Therefore the decision to use SEWS rests with the Incident Controller. This is reflected in and supports the provisions of the Emergency Management Manual Victoria, Part 3, and is also governed by the Victorian Warnings Protocol.

Control agencies are to ensure that they liaise with relevant stakeholder and support agencies, utilising an Emergency Management Team where appropriate, that



includes regular and timely information sharing with the State Response Controller. The Incident Controller (or representative) shall ensure where practicable that the Control Agency Commander, the supporting Agency Commanders for the incident and the Police Co-ordinator are notified of a SEWS (and subsequent Emergency Warning) being issued.

## WARNING MESSAGES

The operational application requires information supplied by the Incident Controller to be compiled into the appropriate warning notice. The Victorian Government Warnings Platform generates pre-planned message templates which are managed by any Victorian Government Agency that would be providing information to the community in the event of an emergency. Telephone alert templates are found in the Victorian Warning Protocols and reflect a common language for all hazards.

Templates assist in the timely dissemination of warnings to the community through multiple channels, and ensure that relevant media outlets broadcast uniform warnings.

SES calls for the use of SEWS in the following warnings:

- Evacuate Immediately (used in flood, earthquake and dam failure).
- Emergency Warning – Earthquake, and
- Land Tsunami Warnings

In line with the national guidelines, Victorian fire agencies use three levels of warning.

### ADVICE

**There is no immediate danger  
General information to keep you up-to-date with developments  
- SEWS must not be used -**

### WATCH & ACT

**It is likely that you will be impacted by the emergency  
You may be in danger and should start taking action to protect your life  
and your family  
- SEWS must not be used -**

### EMERGENCY WARNING

**You will be impacted by the emergency  
You are in danger and must take action immediately  
- This message will usually be preceded by SEWS -**

SEWS should only be used for the Emergency Warning category of warning.

The Incident Controller should inform the community that the heightened risk / threat has passed / eased. SEWS is not to be used for this purpose.

**IMPORTANT: EMERGENCY WARNING NOTICES ARE NOT TO BE  
CONSTRUED AS EVACUATION NOTICES.**

## **EMERGENCY BROADCASTERS**

Warnings are sent directly to Emergency Broadcasters - those media organisations that hold a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Victorian Government. There are currently ten MOUs in place and these can be accessed on the Emergency Management Commissioner's website at [emv.vic.gov.au](http://emv.vic.gov.au).

The *Practice Note for Emergency Broadcasting in Victoria* provides the key details for broadcasting emergency information in Victoria, as well as a full list and maps of Emergency Broadcasters across the state.

## **BROADCASTING WITH THE SEWS**

On receipt of a formal request to issue a warning, the Emergency Broadcasters are to:

1. Confirm the message (if in doubt)
2. Break into broadcasting to commence the broadcast of the Emergency Warning by playing the SEWS for a maximum of 10 seconds
3. Broadcast the Emergency Warning VERBATIM.

Then

4. The emergency announcement, preceded by the SEWS, is to be repeated 5 mins after the original break into programming (unless otherwise requested by the Incident Controller).
5. After this time there is no further need for SEWS for this specific warning. Broadcasters should revert to reading the Emergency Warning every 15 minutes in line with the Practice Note for Emergency Broadcasting in Victoria.

If an updated warning is received, broadcasters should start these instructions anew.

Where there are a high number of warnings happening concurrently, or very close together, SEWS should be played before each group of warnings.

## APPENDIX 1

Below is the text that will appear at the beginning of the warning template requesting the SEWS.

# Emergency Warning

## SEWS REQUIRED

XX/XX/XX XX:XX PM

This is an official emergency warning announcement issued by NAME.

Please broadcast this warning VERBATIM.

The 'Safety Information' and 'Stay Informed' sections should be broadcast at least once in the case of multiple warnings.

Broadcasters should break into programming to broadcast this emergency announcement, preceded by the Standard Emergency Warning Signal.

The announcement is to be repeated 5 mins after the original break into programming, including the SEWS.

After this time there is no further need for SEWS for this specific warning, please revert to reading the warning every 15 minutes in line with the Practice Note for Emergency Broadcasting in Victoria.

If an updated warning is received, please start these broadcasting instructions anew.

## ACTIVATE SEWS ALERT

**MEDIA NOTE:** This warning announcement is valid until XX/XX/XX XX:XX AM and must not be broadcast after this time.

**CONTACT FOR MEDIA:** AGENCY PHONE NUMBER

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**WARNING TEXT>>>>**

