

Tasman District Fire Response 5 – 27 February 2019

Post-Event Report



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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tasman District fire in 2019 was a large wildfire that took many weeks to bring under control and at times threatened a number of communities within the District.

The Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management (MCDEM) operated with an enhanced duty team both in the National Crisis Management Centre and from MCDEM's Wellington office (Bowen House) from the afternoon of 5 February 2019 through to the lifting of the state of local emergency in the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group area on 27 February 2019. This was a prolonged response for MCDEM.

The response was led by Nelson Tasman Civil Defence Emergency Management Group. MCDEM's role was to engage with CDEM Groups, central government agencies and emergency services to support and enable an effective response.

A comprehensive debriefing process was undertaken after this response to ensure that lessons were captured from this event. In terms of areas that will benefit from improvement, the main themes identified were internal processes around roster development and communication; logistics processes, especially for managing requests for staff resources; and developing consistent email communication channels.

There were many positives for MCDEM including the benefits of deploying Development Unit staff early, the valuable contribution provided by newer MCDEM staff, and the well-received regular reporting undertaken.

Overall, feedback recognised that MCDEM's response was effective and pitched at the right level, with particularly strong engagement 'on the ground' in Tasman District. While there is room for improvement, these are largely limited to streamlining and updating administrative and operational processes.

The report provides an overview of the event and its impacts, the response at the national level and the lessons captured through the debrief process. It also suggests remedies for areas that can be improved.

2 PURPOSE

To be effective in its role of putting people at the heart of the emergency management system, MCDEM needs to learn and implement actions for continuous improvement across response and recovery. Every emergency provides an opportunity to reflect on our performance and identify opportunities to become more effective in maintaining public safety and in supporting affected communities, by working with our partners, stakeholders and the media to achieve this.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the MCDEM response to the impacts of the Tasman District fire from 5 to 27 February 2019. The report captures aspects of the response that may be improved and aspects that worked well.

The report represents MCDEM's standard process following each response with debriefing, capturing lessons, and identifying any corrective actions that may be necessary. It is an inward-facing reflection by MCDEM, and is not a review of the overall response to the event, which in this instance was led by the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group, supported by MCDEM. Therefore, as an internal process with a focus on MCDEM's own response performance, it does not cover the CDEM Group nor the Fire and Emergency New Zealand response, it also does not reflect on the wider context of the CDEM framework and its structures.

3 OVERVIEW OF THE RESPONSE

3.1 Incident overview

The Tasman District fire was a large wildfire that took many weeks to bring under control and at times threatened a number of small communities within the District.

The response was led by Nelson Tasman CDEM Group, with the firefighting operation managed by Fire and Emergency New Zealand. The eight iwi across the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group area were actively engaged in the response and recovery effort. Key agencies involved were New Zealand Police, the Ministry for Primary Industries, the District Health Board, New Zealand Defence Force, and Department of Conservation.

The MCDEM Duty Team was activated at Mode 1 (enhanced duty team) at 17:00 hours on Tuesday 5 February, and later activated the National Crisis Management Centre at 08:00 hours on 6 February to engage with CDEM Groups, central government agencies and emergency services.

MCDEM operating from the National Crisis Management Centre undertook the following activities during the response to the Tasman fire:

- Informing and advising the Government of the impact and the response.
- Assisting with the resourcing needs of the affected CDEM Group.
- Providing advice through MCDEM's Development Unit staff and the National Controller about decisions at the CDEM Group and local level.
- Coordinating national government agencies in their support of the response.
- Coordinating resource offers from other CDEM Groups and external agencies.
- Supporting government policy formulation.

Key impacts from the event included damage to property, roads, utilities, and farm and forestry land, and the evacuation of people from at risk homes.

3.2 Summary of actions taken by MCDEM staff

Tuesday 5 February 2019

Around 14:15 hours on 5 February 2019, a fire started in Pigeon Valley in the Tasman District. The fire covered 1870 hectares within a perimeter of 20km as at 03:00 hours on 6 February 2019. Residents from over 100 properties were evacuated or self-evacuated from Pigeon Valley and there were initial reports of property losses in the Eve Valley and Redwood Valley areas. The MCDEM Duty Team was alerted in the late afternoon by the duty Senior Regional Emergency Management Advisor and monitored the situation overnight.

Wednesday 6 February 2019

The National Crisis Management Centre was activated at 08:00 hours at Mode 1, with an enhanced duty team operating.

A state of local emergency was declared at 08:00 hours on 6 February 2019, by the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group. By 11:30 hours, the fire covered 1900 hectares within a perimeter of 22 km and was growing. Over 170 households had been evacuated, and animal welfare was already an area of concern.

A MCDEM Development Unit staff member was deployed to Tasman.

Thursday 7 - Friday 8 February 2019

The fire continued to grow, with the burnt area increased to 2100ha within a perimeter of 27km by Friday.

Wakefield township was put on stand-by for possible evacuation at 21:30 hours on Thursday 7 February, due to uncertain weather conditions. An Emergency Mobile Alert message was sent by Fire and Emergency New Zealand to residents, to advise of this evacuation standby at 22:13 hours as a precaution. In light of expected deteriorating weather conditions (high winds) over the weekend of 9 – 10 February, most of Wakefield was evacuated on Friday 8 February along with the rest of Pigeon Valley. Further Emergency Mobile Alerts were issued by Fire and Emergency New Zealand at 13:18 hours and 17:13 hours to advise residents of the need to evacuate. 863 people registered as evacuees.

The MCDEM Development Unit presence was strengthened by an additional staff member.

Saturday 9 – Sunday 10 February 2019

In total over 2000 people were estimated to have been evacuated. The National Crisis Management Centre received its first request for additional staff resources from the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group and this request was circulated by MCDEM to all CDEM Groups.

The MCDEM Development Unit presence was further enhanced.

Monday 11 – Monday 18 February 2019

The National Crisis Management Centre continued to be activated at Mode 1 and overnight the event was managed remotely by the MCDEM Duty Team. The main activities for staff were managing and coordinating the requests for staff resources from the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group, and providing welfare advice and support. A multi-agency contingency planning workshop took place on Monday 11 February, hosted by MCDEM.

MCDEM Development Unit presence continued.

Tuesday 19 – Thursday 21 February 2019

Although MCDEM remained activated at Mode 1, the response moved from the National Crisis Management Centre to MCDEM office (and continued to be remotely managed by the MCDEM Duty Team overnight and through the weekend). On 21 February, all residents were allowed to return to their homes.

MCDEM Development Unit presence continued.

Friday 22 – Sunday 24 February 2019

MCDEM Development Unit presence continued.

Monday 25 February 2019

CDEM Group staff on standby to support the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group were stood down.

MCDEM Development Unit presence was scaled down but continued.

Wednesday 27 February 2019

The state of local emergency for the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group area was lifted and a notice of transition to recovery was issued. The formal response ended for MCDEM.

Thursday 28 February 2019, onwards

The MCDEM Development Unit staff presence continued to advise on recovery.

4 EVALUATION

4.1 Method

The information in this report was captured during two debriefing sessions for MCDEM staff who worked in the National Crisis Management Centre during the event response and who were deployed as Advisors during the response. The process for debriefs after the response followed a lessons management methodology. The following format was used for staff to provide feedback into the debrief:

- **Observation** – detailed information about what people observed during the response.
- **Barriers** – barriers that prohibited people from resolving issues in the response.
- **Opportunities** – opportunities that were identified in the response.
- **Highlights** – things that worked well in the response and should be reinforced.

4.2 Highlights (What worked well)

The flexibility of operating in the National Crisis Management Centre at Mode 1 (Monitor) with enhanced duty arrangements was appropriate for this type of response. Maintaining this mode of operation provided flexibility in being able to revert to duty team arrangements overnight and to work remotely when required. Although, at times Mode 2 (Engage) may have more appropriately reflected the role MCDEM was fulfilling, maintaining a Mode 1 activation provided consistency and flexibility.

The ‘numbers at a glance’ reporting was well-received. This was a good concept, conveying key facts and figures in a clear, concise format, and should be a model for future responses, although there were challenges with keeping it updated, and ensuring the numbers across the situation report and the graphic were consistent.

Text groups was a useful way for providing regular updates to Duty Team members. Further development of protocols for using text groups during a response would be useful.

Having multiple Development Unit staff on the ground throughout the response enabled the deployed staff to be across the many areas of the response. Throughout the response, the deployed Development Unit staff were very responsive and provided a valuable link between the National Crisis Management Centre and the regional-level response.

Recovery arrangements were established early. MCDEM had capacity to support the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group, with staff present on the ground to help establish recovery arrangements.

The day and night arrangement worked well, i.e. having staff in the National Crisis Management Centre during the day, and having the MCDEM Duty Team monitoring the situation overnight.

4.3 What could be improved

The feedback that was registered from the debrief process can be grouped into four main themes. This section deals with the four themes and suggests remedies for the key points identified in each.

4.3.1 MCDEM response staffing arrangements

Rostering

Although some feedback indicated that roster development and communication was very clear during this event, there was also feedback suggesting that there is still room for improvement. Issues related to staff capacity for longer duration events, the need for clear communication around rostering and the continuation of business-as-usual work, and building staff capability in the rostering function. For longer duration responses, moving as soon as possible to a full week roster will help to increase certainty for staff.

In future responses, there is a need to account for all roles on the central roster. This will enable a full picture of the MCDEM staff involved in a response to be developed, including those staff deployed to affected areas.

Shift handovers

There was mixed feedback on the shift handovers. Handovers were complicated as not all took place in person due to shift timings, and inconsistent handover formats/templates were used. Standard function handover templates need to be developed, to establish consistency across all functions.

Call-back and time-off-in-lieu

The complexity of this emergency demonstrated inconsistency in the approach for call-back and time-off-in-lieu for MCDEM staff. The policy will be reviewed as a result of the feedback received.

4.3.2 Functional processes

Request for assistance process

The initial process for dealing with requests for assistance did not work well early in the event, and a more effective process was subsequently established mid-event. A common and consistent process for requests for assistance is under development by MCDEM and CDEM Groups.

Welfare services

The national welfare services function was not fully activated immediately for this response. Emphasis on the importance of establishing the welfare services function as soon as possible in a response will be incorporated into standard operating procedures and included in training and exercises.

Geospatial requirements and support

Identifying and coordinating geospatial needs and support requires clarification to maximise the value-add during the response. The new geospatial duty viewer was a valuable tool and needs to be socialised with MCDEM staff to create greater familiarisation about the viewer.

4.3.3 Communications

Email communications

The response again highlighted challenges with the use of MCDEM, generic MCDEM Duty and National Crisis Management Centre email addresses. The ability to now access National Crisis Management Centre email accounts remotely will support a consistent approach.

Threshold between MCDEM Duty Team and National Crisis Management Centre activation

There was uncertainty in this event about the threshold between when the MCDEM duty team was operating and when it transitioned to the National Crisis Management Centre. Emphasis on the importance of communicating when the transition has occurred will be incorporated into standard operating procedures and included in training and exercises.

Emergency Management Information System

As MCDEM was operating in support of the Nelson Tasman CDEM Group (rather than MCDEM leading the response), documents were filed in both the Emergency Management Information System and National Crisis Management Centre files. A how-to guide for filing documents consistently is to be added to standard operating procedures.

4.3.4 Regional/national engagement

Development Unit staff deployment

Having multiple Regional Coordinators and/or Senior Regional Emergency Management Advisors deployed to the affected area was valuable. However, greater capacity of Development Unit staff would be required for events affecting a larger geographical area (e.g. multiple regions) and/or for longer duration events.

Deployed staff communications

Regular teleconferences are a key mechanism for monitoring the health, safety and wellbeing of deployed staff, and also for enabling regular updates on the response. More regular and scheduled health and safety check-ins will be standardised and undertaken by a single function in future.