# Community Trust and Responses to Multi-Agency Warnings

*Findings from Phase One of Research Package 1: Encouraging Protective Action and Enhancing Trust with Multi-Agency Risk and Warning Communication Strategies*

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## RESEARCH PACKAGE 1 AIMS

1. To better understand how community members respond to multi-media risk and warning communication from multiple agencies during natural hazards; and,
2. To develop an understanding of the optimal communication strategy (e.g. timing, content, agency) to enhance community trust in agencies and encourage protective action.

## METHOD

Six focus groups were conducted in three states with a total of 32 participants across Australia. Two groups focused on riverine flooding in rural and regional areas and four focused on bushfires in semi-rural areas.

Focus group materials were developed in partnership with the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), Victoria State Emergency Services (VIC SES) and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in Western Australia.

Each focus group evaluated a BoM video and agency official warnings in three formats (i.e. written long-form, video, and emergency alert). These warnings reflected an escalating event that peaked in an evacuation scenario.

Responses were analysed for trust, risk, and intended protective action responses over the course of the event.

## FINDINGS

- ❑ There were very high levels of institutional trust in all emergency service agencies.
- ❑ All messages required verification by community members (even at the Emergency Alert level).
- ❑ There was congruence between agency messaging but conflict within some agency messages (e.g. around use of term "warning"), leading participants to question desired behavioural intention.
- ❑ Agency videos (especially with a uniformed officer as spokesperson) had the ability to gain attention to the message.
- ❑ A personalised approach to video content and style was seen as useful.
- ❑ Emergency Alerts led some participants to the required action but for some participants there was confusion.

## IMPLICATIONS

The following practical implications are suggested for consideration by the sector:

- ❑ Review messages to enhance alignment to desired behavioural intentions.
- ❑ Consider adding features (such as maps with location details and banners) to videos.
- ❑ Enhance existing or create videos with uniformed spokespeople that adopt a personalised approach.
- ❑ Identify opportunities for collaborating with media and others to support community's verification needs.
- ❑ Further investigate content, design and intent of Emergency Alerts.

## END-USER STATEMENTS

*"Based on the research conducted, the Bureau will likely explore greater flexibility in communication style, options for working with media and other agencies to incorporate visual footage (particularly television), and the possibility of interactions between multi-agency and media messages. The Bureau is appreciative of the opportunity to work closely with QUT researchers in better understanding community responsiveness to our warnings communications and to provide guidance for enhancing our services to the community."* – **Bureau of Meteorology**

*"The research suggests consideration be given to greater alignment to intentions within a bushfire warning message by reducing conflict within messages. QFES will review options for rephrasing the "if you are not leaving" section of the warnings to ensure the focus on leaving remains strong throughout the message. The research supports QFES' approach to personalising messages through emphasis on words such as "you" and including phrases about wanting "you and your family to be safe"* – **Queensland Fire and Emergency Services**

*"The QUT research provided VICSES important and useful research findings that will be used to support and improve delivery of public information and warnings during emergencies. Specifically, based on the research, VICSES plans to review and refine warning products to ensure nomenclature within the content of warnings is consistent, and by exploring options to improve targeting of warning products. Second, VICSES intends to explore new resources to aid comprehension and verification of warnings through the development of pre-prepared videos, as well as guidance notes, training and resources for personnel."* – **Victoria State Emergency Services:**