

South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service pioneers use of Command Support System

The South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service is now using the Command Support System in both its mobile Incident Command Unit and at the State Coordination Centre on a regular basis. Bulletin asked Assistant Chief Officer Roy Thompson to give an update on progress.

Could you describe some of the major incidents that have now been managed using the Command Support System?

We have used the system at a large chemical spill that went on for about 8 hours and involved about 50 firefighters as well as a multiple agency response including police, ambulance and the EPA. It was used at a major gas leak that involved the partial evacuation of Adelaide's primary hospital and Adelaide University, also involving multiple agencies and about 30 firefighters. The system was used at a large grass fire threatening several homes a couple of weeks after the Victorian bushfires earlier this year. It was particularly effective for overlaying the fire area, with GIS data received from an aerial water bomber.

What have been the benefits of using the CSS technology and approach?

Ease of use, very quick to 're-acquaint' yourself with the software - this is a major issue for most other software that purports to achieve this.

The advantage of the Command Support System is that it is based on a Decision Making Doctrine that all our Incident Controllers have been trained to use and rely on. This is applicable no matter what type of incident or how large the scale or duration. It means that all the information that is required to manage the incident is available in one place and in a format that they are familiar with. I believe that the System, once fully implemented, will also become an invaluable debriefing and training tool.

How have SAMFS staff been trained in their use of the system, and how are they exploiting its functionality as they become more familiar with it?

So far only a handful, but we are planning to train about 25 users in a training programme starting in May this year. These are senior officers, as we believe it is essential that this level of officer should understand how to use the system to manage incidents. Learning how to understand and use the software itself is quite straightforward. It is knowing how to use the system's functionality that is the key to supporting incident management.

Do laptops get used throughout incident grounds to send back incident information through wireless networks? What other communications technologies are being used?

I do have a couple of laptops set up to do this, but due to the lack of training they haven't yet been deployed. We are using 3G to connect at the moment but may look at WiFi as well.

The Command Support System is currently on one large mobile Incident Command Unit, but we are also looking at fitting out smaller, van-size vehicles with the system to give us greater flexibility.

What general observations can you make on the recent catastrophic fires in Victoria, the problems of climate change and growing fire threats in Australia, as well as future plans by country and metropolitan fire services throughout Australia to prepare to respond to these threats?

There is no doubt that climate change is having a dramatic effect on bushfire size, frequency and intensity in South Eastern Australia, and we are now planning to tackle these fires on an annual basis, either at home or in support of our neighbouring states. What happened in Victoria this year could easily have happened in South Australia - we had exactly the same fire conditions on the same day as Victoria. We managed to 'dodge the bullet' this year, but we know it is only a matter of time before a severe rural/urban interface fire threatens the foothills of Adelaide.

We helped support the response to the fires in Victoria by sending teams of 100 people every 5 days, with a total of 800 going altogether. This sort of inter-state cooperation has been happening in Australia for many years.

The whole subject of fire is much more sensitive now, following the Victoria fires. People are edgy. At a recent fire near the city of Adelaide, which probably could have been handled with 4 pumps and two aerial water bombers, 25 vehicles were sent, to ensure there was no problem and to reassure the public.

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