

Regarding failure by the DSE and CFA to significantly improve website delivery of bushfire information since the 2006 fires.

*About this submission:*

*The following topic was raised at the Strathewan meeting of residents and Commissioners by Mr. Shane Pugh of Powell's Road, Strathewan. His suggestion was noted and filed. Mr. Pugh has urged me to submit the details of the Firedog alert plan to the commission, as well as my observations on the performance of the CFA and DSE websites in 2006 and 2009, my attempts to help solve the online problems in 2006 and my professional comments on the likely causes for the neglect and poor performance of both websites.*

*About the Author:*

*My name is Kim Lynch. I am a resident of Wattle Glen. I have made websites for large corporations and for Federal Government. I also lecture in Multimedia at RMIT University. My career in website design spans fourteen years, enough experience to make an informed opinion on the performance and content of the CFA and DSE websites.*

## **Introduction**

Evidence is based on the fact that a detailed set of solutions was presented to the DSE, the CFA, State and Local Government in 2006. The solutions were cheap, effective and quick to implement. Firedog was the working name for a Community Bushfire Alert Plan. The expected outcomes were:

- 1. To prevent the CFA & DSE websites from failing under pressure caused by extraordinary demand during emergencies.**
- 2. To provide residents of each Shire with a clear online map that shows the current status of bushfires in their area.**

## 1.0

### 2006-2009

An Online Bushfire Information Plan for Local Districts was drafted out following the Australia Day fires of 2006. It involved a simple process of translating the CFA and DSE updates into graphic symbols over a Shire map, and publishing that to a website at the time official updates are released. I have placed a mock-up of the web page for your reference. It is not interactive. Please see:

[http://www.thereef.com.au/fire/nillumbik\\_fire\\_alert.htm](http://www.thereef.com.au/fire/nillumbik_fire_alert.htm)

I was prompted to act following first hand experience of the Australia Day fires of 2006. The inadequacy of the CFA and DSE websites to cope with the load of 'hits' as well as their sketchy reference to sometimes obscure place names caused friends in the fire zone to suffer major stress in their anxious attempts to get clear information and some sort of overview of what was going on. All agreed a visual 'overview map' would have been welcome and useful.

After the fires there was nothing but praise for the Radio National coverage and condemnation for the online performance of the DSE and CFA websites. Both sites crashed under the load.

In 2006 I sent a detailed outline to every Minister in the State Governments of Vic, NSW, SA, QLD and Tasmania; all Fire Officers in every Shire in Victoria and to the CFA and DSE Directors.

Part of the outline included a do-able solution to the website overload problem. There was no response.

**Following the 2006 fires the public was assured that all online performance would be improved.**

## 2.0

### 2009 Fires

It is on public record that the CFA and DSE websites failed to cope with the load once again.

In 2006 I analysed their presentation of urgent information from a communications perspective, and can say nothing has been done to replace the inadequate map on the DSE site and the “current update” list of place names published to the CFA site. There have been some additions to the DSE site but nothing has changed to help those seeking immediate local information.

The DSE site was overloaded by mid-afternoon on Black Saturday. The CFA site coped until 5 pm after which it was in trouble and access became patchy. This situation was not just due to the magnitude of the fires. Both websites were disabled for the same reasons as in the 2006 bushfires – overload.

On Black Saturday many of our friends were desperate for news - we live in the path of the Fire Zone near Hurstbridge and like many others, became a haven for refugees from Strathewan and St Andrews. We gave support as they heard news of their houses going, people making it out in time, and those that did not. Needless to say they were all traumatised and in need of current information.

The only source was Radio National. Even so, news about **Strathewan** was thin. Mobile coverage broke down in that area.

*\* Some sort of direct information from the frontline is needed. Handheld radio transmitters or frequency scanners in the pockets of local residents, for instance.*

### **3.0 Likely causes for neglect.**

#### **3.1 Management**

The decisions affecting change to online content and delivery are ultimately made by Senior Personnel under advice from their in-house IT people.

#### **3.2 IT Departments**

The secondary cause for a reluctance to change may have something to do with the culture of departmental intransigence that exists in the IT sector. Please ask any IT contractor to confirm. There are tell-tale signs that indicate a dominance of IT personnel in the decision making process.

For example, the lack of regard for Graphic Sophistication that is evident in both sites is indicative of a situation where IT personnel may have the power of veto over online design issues, including graphic design and public relations delivery.

Graphic sophistication in websites simply means that the design should streamline communication by utilising good graphic design to navigate the viewer directly to the information, and to present the information clearly. Both departments are not utilising the full power of the medium.

IT people have a habit of dismissing graphic design as superfluous and regard technical suggestions from 'outside' contractors as a threat to their own status.

In my experience with IT departments I have found there to be a strong resistance to any incursions into their domain by consultant technicians and designers. Lateral jumps are impossible. They're engineers - they defend their 'engine rooms' and are quick to shoot down offers of outside help. The solution to the Bushfire Information problem needs expertise beyond their competencies. This is self evident in their job descriptions as web programmers working for the CFA and DSE. If it is the case that the IT work is currently outsourced, we would advise a close scrutiny of the companies responsible.

There are in Melbourne several quite brilliant IT contractors I could recommend who would solve the overload and interface problems.

I have discussed the matter with a specialist ISP who last time this happened in 2006, expressed a real interest in helping out. He saw no problem in setting up an auxiliary system that would handle the load from Nillumbik residents, if not the whole State. I am certain he would be even more keen to help out following Black Saturday. His company is well respected in the Melbourne IT and business communities.

The bandwidth solution as it was presented in 2006 needed work, but even so, if implemented would have taken the bulk of the hits during the recent emergency.

### **3.3 Time Lapse Problem**

A main issue under scrutiny is the period between reports from the field and the release of information to the public. The process – the time it takes for information from the fire zones to be verified and approved for publication can be improved but only with imposed help from skilled network specialists and the cooperation of senior management. If the findings of the Commission are entrusted to the existing IT staff to implement the results will be disappointing.

## **4.0 Firedog Plan**

### **4.1 As presented to all parties in 2006.**

The DSE and CFA release the official fire update to the Media every twenty minutes or so.

A small team located at the Shire offices would immediately translate the verbal report into symbols superimposed over a Shire map and would publish the update to a Fire Map website.

It would be strictly on the basis of interpretation of official CFA/DSE updates. No mobile or text reports, nothing unverified.

*Note: Our original suggestion was to take information direct from the CB radio chat at the firefronts and have a roster of local retired CFA officers monitor the information with hand scanners at the Council offices, and who would interpret the data for the website map update.*

### **4.2 Trust**

The CFA and DSE management would need to trust local Councils to ensure the accuracy of the "pins on the map" before updates are published, the rest is easy enough and could be in place before the next fire season. Local Council with all its planning infrastructure software, its fire officers and its ready access to local knowledge is best placed to accurately identify landmarks, roads and properties in local districts. Retired CFA and council officers would be invited to participate as advisors, easing the load on council staff.

### **4.3 Implementation**

The ideal solution is to build sophisticated mapping software, but there are at least two low tech approaches that would work for next fire season based on a volunteer system. It would need only a basic working knowledge of websites and graphics software. Everyone in the city wants to help. There are now thousands of Photoshop operators as are there those familiar with updating websites. There are no specialist IT skills involved in the operation. The end product is a graphic image that goes up to the site every 20 minutes. Simple online software can be built, tested and implemented that would perform most tasks needed for the operation of an emergency site at Council HQ's before next summer.

The plan has captured the imagination of many local residents in this fire-prone district. There would be no problems in publicising a "fire map" site for each district in Victoria. Radio National would get the word out, letting residents know they should go to the local Council site for the link, as well as broadcasting a direct address for the website. The DSE and CFA sites would provide a clear linking system via a statewide map.

The CFA and DSE managements would most likely resist any move to de-centralise their online information, but the fact remains: they have not improved on their online delivery and may have a case to answer. They seem to be blaming the size of the fires for the overload to their information outlets. The fact is, the websites are inadequate for the reporting of major bushfires.

### **Conclusion**

I emphasise the importance of engaging experts from outside the DSE, CFA and State Government to handle the solution to inadequate delivery of online information. I am prepared to entrust the details of a rescue plan to the Commission in Confidence.

It would be inaccurate to view this submission as a pitch for business, although I would be happy to take it on. I have endeavored to bring to your attention some

first-hand technical insight into the failure of the delivery of urgent online information in the State of Victoria on the seventh of February, 2009.

For more detail please contact me. I am free to give evidence if required.

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Best Regards,

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