

3 November 2017

Frequently Asked Questions

How coordinated was the response to the fires?

The Review has identified shortfalls in the ways the fire agencies worked together. There was a lack of planning and consistency, which did lead to confusion.

The Review found that, at a tactical and individual level, information sharing was in place, supported by good relationships. At a systemic level, the various agencies operated under different plans and command and control structures, which were not comprehensively aligned. Adding to this was different incident management terminology across the fire services and the wider emergency sector agencies.

Due to the merger under Fire and Emergency NZ, next time, it will be one organisation responding to a fire like this in an urban/rural setting.

Who was in charge?

At the time of the Port Hills fires, Rural Firefighting Authorities and responsibilities were embedded into councils and territorial authorities. The New Zealand Fire Service and Rural Fire Authorities were operating under two separate legislative frameworks, coordinated through interagency agreements.

The fire in Early Valley Road came under the responsibility of Selwyn District Council. The fire that started on Marley's Hill was in Department of Conservation territory. The fires eventually spread across the jurisdiction of three fire agencies; Department of Conservation, Selwyn District Council and the urban fire agency New Zealand Fire Service.

The Review found that a key decision made jointly in the early stages of the fires to manage the two fires as one incident, under the management of the Rural Firefighting Authority of Selwyn District Council was an insightful one that increased the effectiveness of the response.

Should Firefighters have been stood down on the Monday night?

The Review found that it was the correct and safe decision to stand firefighters down on the Monday night.

At 8pm Monday night, a joint decision was made to withdraw the ground crews and use the last of the remaining light to focus on multiple monsoon bucket drops. With an analysis of how the fire was behaving at the time, it was decided a fire patrol would be maintained overnight, with the knowledge that firefighters were nearby should they need to be called back. When the fire flared up again at 2am, Fire Service and Rural personnel responded immediately.

We acknowledge and accept the Review's finding that though this was the correct operational decision, we should have given more consideration to our presence assuring the public.

Could more have been done to save houses on Worsley's Road on Wednesday?

Despite best efforts from fire crews, they were unable to protect all of the houses. They were restricted by water supply issues, smoke, significant ember transfers and radiant heat. The firefighters tried to remain in the street to protect the properties but when power transmission

wires fell onto the road the commander was faced with a difficult decision. If the power was cut to make it safe to access the properties further up the road, this would result in losing the water supply and therefore restrict the crew's capability to make a difference.

Why weren't there more firefighters on the ground more quickly?

Rural firefighting is a highly technical, specialised response. It works quite differently to the urban, structure firefighting setting that most people are familiar with. While it may have appeared to some members of the public that there were insufficient numbers, the nature of the terrain and the intensity of the fire played a large part in determining the response.

The terrain, fuel, and weather of the Port Hills meant this would be an intense, fast moving, changeable fire which would be difficult to fight from the ground due to restricted access and water supplies, and having only one way in and out from the fire ground could trap firefighters in the fire's path.

The focus was initially on an aerial attack by helicopters with monsoon buckets identifying hot spots of the fire as this would be more effective. Ground crews set up a series of incident points to protect properties.

We accept and acknowledge the Review's finding that these decisions were correct operationally but were not communicated well to the public. We should have given more consideration to how our presence would have provided more assurance to the community. We have learned from this and are working to ensure that priority is given to engaging with the community before, during and after a response to explain why certain decisions are made and continuing to work with communities through the recovery phase.

If you knew the conditions were going to get worse, why did you not give people time to get valuables?

The fire moved faster than we were expecting, especially with the change of wind. It's important to remember that this was a fast developing fire, moving at great speed, faster than you could run, and with incredibly intensity. We will always err on the side of caution and protect life when weighing up what opportunity, if any, there is for people to retrieve valuables.

We acknowledge more could have been done to give people time to get valuables from their homes, especially before heavy machinery was used. These were operational decisions that were made with a fast moving fire, but we should have given more thought to communicating better with the community.

Why didn't you tell people what was going on?

We know that our communication with the public, and particularly homeowners, should have been better. This has been an important lesson for us.

We're committed to providing our people with more training and resources to help them engage effectively with communities to raise awareness of the risk and help them be more prepared on fire safety and prevention.

We're changing our planning to ensure it pays specific attention to how we keep property owners and communities informed during a major event. We will also focus on maintaining communication during the recovery phase.

We are working across agencies to make sure we communicate best with our communities. This includes initiatives such as Civil Defence's new Emergency Mobile Alert system. The system uses cell broadcast technology to send messages to enabled phones, so alerts can be targeted to specific geographic locations.