

Australian Capital Territory

Emergencies (Alerts and Warning Systems) Commissioner's Guidelines 2024

Notifiable Instrument NI2024–126

made under the

Emergencies Act 2004, s 11 (Commissioner may make guidelines).

1 Name of Instrument

This instrument is the *Emergencies (Alerts and Warning Systems) Commissioner's Guidelines 2024*.

2 Commencement

This instrument commences on the day after it is notified.

3 Commissioner's Guidelines

I make the Commissioner's Guidelines relating to the use of the Alerts and Warning Systems at Schedule 1.

4 Revocation

This instrument revokes NI2019-23 *Emergencies (Emergency Alert) Commissioner's Guidelines 2019*.

Wayne Phillips
Commissioner
ACT Emergency Services Agency

08 March 2024

Schedule 1

ACT EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCY

COMMISSIONER'S GUIDELINES

relating to

**the use of Alerts and Warnings by the
ACT Emergency Services Agency**

2024

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide Commissioner's Guidelines to describe the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) arrangements for the provision of public information and warnings related to the Agency's four operational Services in an emergency as articulated under sections 8 and 11 of the *Emergencies Act 2004* (the Act).

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Under section 8(4)(h) of the Act, in the exercise of the ESA Commissioner's functions, they must emphasise the importance of communicating information, advice and warnings to the community during an emergency. For the Commissioner's Guidelines this will apply to the ESA's hazard owners.
- 2.2 Under section 11 of the Act, the ESA Commissioner may make guidelines for the strategic operation of each of the emergency services. The guidelines may make provision in relation to the planning and conduct of joint operations, areas of the ESA to be operated jointly, operation of joint areas of ESA, and to the strategic organisation and operation of each of the ESA Services that the Commissioner considers appropriate.
- 2.3 Under section 12 of the Act, the ESA Commissioner may delegate their functions under the Act or another Territory law to a public servant, a member of an emergency service, a police officer, or an emergency services support volunteer. The ESA Commissioner's functions under these guidelines can be delegated to the Assistant Commissioners, the four emergency services Chief Officers for the ambulance service, fire & rescue, rural fire service and the state emergency service, and Incident Controllers.
- 2.4 The effective communication of public information and warnings is a critical element of emergency management, with the power to save lives. A series of significant and devastating emergencies across Australia including the 2003 Canberra bushfires, Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, Black Summer fires in 2019–20, major flooding in Queensland during 2010–11, and major flooding Australia wide in 2021–22, highlighted the power of warnings to save lives and a need to learn more about why some warning strategies were more successful than others.
- 2.5 The provision of accurate and timely warnings is seen as a priority action in any emergency, equal to any other aspect of emergency response. This applies to any hazard, whether it is a natural hazard such as fire, flood or heatwave, an incident of public safety and security, or a health-related event such as a pandemic. Across Australia, Commonwealth, state and territory governments and their emergency service organisations and statutory bodies hold responsibilities for issuing warnings. Community members and organisations also play a shared role in communicating warnings.

3. WARNING PRINCIPLES

3.1 What is a Warning

A warning provides point-in-time information about a hazard that is impacting or is expected to impact communities. It describes the impact and expected consequences for communities and includes advice on what people should do.

3.2 What is an Alert

An alert is when a warning is issued for an actual or imminent emergency after which a message (text) or phone call is sent/made to people's mobile and landline phones within a defined geographic area about the emergency. The alert tells people in the affected area what action needs to be taken by them.

3.3 What is Public Information

Public information is used by emergency management organisations to describe the function and provision of information and warnings to the public during an emergency. Warnings are a specific form of public information.

In an actual, imminent or potential emergency, communities require a wide range of information including, but not limited to, official warnings. This might include general information about the nature of an approaching hazard, information on looking after human and animal health during an emergency, community meetings, local assistance or resources, relief, and recovery services.

Emergency warning messages are often presented separately to more detailed public information to ensure they remain easily identifiable and understood.

3.4 Why we Warn

The provision of information and warnings is a priority in an emergency for any organisation with responsibility for community safety. Warnings can save lives and minimise harm by facilitating protective action.

People's lives can be placed at risk during an emergency if they do not have the necessary information to take protective action or lack specific guidance on what to do. Warnings play a critical role in saving and protecting life and property. They serve and support broader risk management actions ranging from hazard reduction and emergency response to ongoing community education and building disaster resilience..

Community expectations of government agencies and emergency services continue to grow in an era of rapidly evolving information sharing technologies. Experience from previous disasters highlight challenging expectations that timely, targeted, and tailored warnings will always be provided. Communities expect that near 'real time' information will be shared promptly and effectively. Emergency services organisations

ensure, as a matter of timely practice, to provide real time warnings to the community.

3.5 Australia's Warning Principles

Ten principles guide the development and use of warnings in Australia. They outline why warnings are important and how warnings are provided most effectively. The ACT Warnings Handbook 2023 outlines the ten principles, which are:

- Life saving;
- Empowering;
- Trusted, authoritative and verifiable;
- Scale based on risk;
- Timely, targeted and tailored;
- Conveying impact;
- Including a call to action;
- Clearly communicated;
- Readily accessible; and
- Part of a bigger picture.

4. WARNING RESPONSIBILITIES

4.1 Under the Act, the ESA Commissioner is responsible for community education and awareness about emergencies and improving community preparedness for emergencies. The Commissioner also has a responsibility to communicate information, advice, and warnings to the community as described in paragraph 2.1 during an emergency.

4.2 The ESA Commissioner has designated under the *Community Communication and Information Plan* that the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (CMTEDD) will be responsible to ensure arrangements are in place for the coordination and deployment of ACT Government resources for the provision of community communication and information.

5. NATIONAL WARNING FRAMEWORK: THE AUSTRALIAN WARNING SYSTEM (AWS)

5.1 The AWS is a new national approach to information and warnings during emergencies like bushfire, flood, storm, extreme heat, and severe weather. The *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020* recommended that all states and territories should urgently seek to implement the AWS. States and territories are progressively aligning with the new and consistent AWS, where previously, there have been different warning systems for different hazard types across Australia.

5.2 The AWS has been designed based on social research and feedback from more than 14,000 people across the country from communities, emergency services and hazard agencies aiming to deliver a more consistent approach to emergency warnings, nationally. In the ACT context, the AWS builds on existing warning frameworks and applies to

bushfire (already implemented in the ACT), flood, severe weather/storms, extreme heat, and hazardous materials. The AWS is designed to be adaptable and scalable to other hazards into the future that will be captured by the 'Other' hazard type within the AWS Framework.

- 5.3 The AWS is a three-level, scaled system that includes a nationally consistent set of hazard icons for each warning level to show warnings on various publishing platforms (e.g., websites and apps) and provides calls to action. There are icons for cyclone, bushfire, flood, extreme heat, storm, and other. There is a consistent shape and colour scheme, with icons increasing in size as the warning level increases.
- 5.4 Each warning level is combined with an action statement to give the community clear advice about what they need to do. Calls to action can be used flexibly across all three warning levels and contextualised for each hazard within each state or territory.
- 5.5 Alerts and warnings will:
 - a. warn targeted areas of the ACT community of potential or imminent threats from emergency incidents; and
 - b. direct those warned to other sources of information and/or direct them to move away from an imminent hazard or threat.
- 5.6 The AWS sits within a broader context of public information and warnings, which include:
 - general preparedness and pre-season messaging (e.g., community engagement campaigns);
 - information and advice about increasing hazard danger or impact (e.g., short-term forecasts, weather products, fire danger ratings);
 - general information about hazard or planned events which are not posing a threat or do not require specific community action;
 - information and advice on reduced threats (i.e., closure of hazard event, or when a hazard is no longer posing a threat to the community);
 - relief and recovery information commencing during the hazard impact ;
 - ongoing information and messaging (i.e., routine information about recovery or preparing for future hazard events).
- 5.7 The following ESA Lead Response Agencies (LRAs) are responsible for ensuring they develop and maintain the currency of their procedures that support the AWS functionality in responding to their respective hazards:
 - ACT Ambulance Service – Heatwaves.
 - ACT Fire & Rescue – Hazmat (covered under the 'Other' AWS hazard type) and grass and bushfires in the built-up areas.
 - ACT Rural Fire Service – Grass and bushfires in the rural areas.
 - ACT State Emergency Service – Floods and severe weather/storms.

- 5.8 The ESA's current warnings publishing platform and the ESA website will be used to deliver AWS messages as the primary way of displaying warnings in the ACT. Messaging will also be published to the Agency's public facing social media channels and provided as a web services feeds to 3rd party applications such as Hazards Near Me. Other media platforms such as radio, television, emergency alert, variable message signs (VMS) as well as other internet-based information dissemination platforms depending on the severity of the emergency.
- 5.9 The AWS will improve the ACT's alerts and warnings capability by applying the agreed nationally consistent approach to information and warnings. It will align the ACT with NSW for specific hazard types and improve the ESA's ability to provide timely and relevant warnings to the public. The AWS will better prepare the public for and responding to emergency events within the ACT and at cross border areas through the concept of 'calls to action'.

6. **AUTHORITY TO ISSUE WARNINGS AND EMERGENCY ALERTS**

- 6.1 Authority for issuing warnings in the ACT is aligned with the three AWS warning levels as delegated by the ESA Commissioner. Approval authority in the ACT escalates with each of the warning levels as follows:
- a. **Advice** – An advice message is the lowest level warning and is normally advising the community to stay informed about a particular incident. This can be approved by the LRA responsible for the hazard. This will be approved by an Incident Controller, Duty Officer, or Chief Officer of the service responding to the hazard.
 - b. **Watch and Act** – The escalating nature of this warning level may require some community action. The warning must be approved by the Chief Officer or relevant delegate from within the Service agency (as per their procedures). If the Chief Officer or relevant delegate is unavailable the Incident Controller will be responsible for approving a Watch and Act warning.
 - c. **Emergency Warning including Emergency Alert (EA) campaigns** – An Emergency Warning is the most critical of the three warning levels and requires immediate action by the community. An Emergency Warning is also likely to trigger the need to have an EA campaign to better communicate the immediate call to action by the community. For this reason, authority to issue an Emergency Warning or EA sits with the ESA Commissioner. If the Commissioner is unavailable, authority is delegated to either the Assistant Commissioner Operations or the Chief Officer from the hazard owning LRA. If all are unavailable, approval to issue an Emergency Warning or EA is the responsibility of the Incident Controller.
- 6.2 The mechanism for approving an Emergency Warning or an EA campaign, is undertaken through the ACT's Emergency Warning and Alert Approval Line (EWAAL).

- 6.3 EWAAL will be used for unforeseen and quickly escalating hazards that occur in the ACT. Use of the EWAAL is outlined in the relevant procedure that governs its use.
- 6.4 The Alerts and Warnings Commissioner’s Guidelines describes the public information and warning options/tools that are used to communicate information to the ACT community. Beyond the ESA website and community facing channel described above, the ESA also utilises the tools outlined below.

7. EMERGENCY ALERT

7.1 EA is the national telephone-based warning system where voice messages are sent to landline telephones and text messages to mobile telephones within a specific area, alerting persons within that area about likely or actual emergency events.

7.2 Guiding Principles for the use of EA:

- a. The potential for loss of life and/or a major threat to a significant number of properties.
- b. When the community is required to take urgent action due to the time and scale of the potential impact.
- c. When a State of Alert or a State of Emergency has been declared under the Act.

7.3 EA provides the ability to send warning messages to landlines and mobile phones within a particular area. EA is not an “opt in” system, with the system designed to send messages to all phones within the targeted area.

7.4 EA may also be used as part of incident management exercises undertaken by the ESA using the EA training platform.

7.5 The ESA will continue to assist in training and competency maintenance for ACT Policing EA Operators.

7.6 Detailed user instructions of EA is outlined in the ACT Warnings Handbook.

7.7 EA is also used by ACT Policing who have direct access to the system. ACT Health and the Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate as LRAs for their respective hazards may use EA through the ESA if needed, and who have their own procedures and policy around its use.

7.8 Backup Arrangements

The EA system is operated using Telstra infrastructure. Primary access to undertake an EA campaign is through the ACT Government network linking to the Telstra infrastructure via fixed fibre connections.

7.9 In the event the fixed line infrastructure is not available, the system may be accessed by the 4G Mobile Networks.

- 7.10 The ESA Commissioner may also request other jurisdictions (principally NSW agencies) to undertake a campaign over the ACT.
- 7.11 The ESA will undertake regular testing of EA, including the fixed line and 4G capabilities every 12 months.

8. LOCATION BASED WARNINGS

- 8.1 The ESA has further matured its warning capability in the ACT by introducing location-based warnings for certain hazard types. These will appear on the ESA public facing website map as a warning area polygon where it is needed. Where they are applied, they will conform with AWS warning levels and colour formats.
- 8.2 The messaging associated with these warning areas are tailored to the specific location, giving the community more accurate information based on where they are. This may mean the public could see multiple warning areas for a particular hazard.
- 8.3 The LRA will advise the ESA when and where to use location-based warnings in the ACT. This will be informed by the operational triggers contained within the procedures developed by each LRA, for their respective hazard. It will accompany other components of the warning, which will describe the situation, the potential impact area and what action the community should take in response to a hazard.

9. INCIDENT AND INFORMATION ROLES IN ALERTS AND WARNINGS

9.1 Role of the Incident Controller

If the recommendation to use an alert or warning is made by a Service Duty Officer, an Incident Controller must be appointed. The Incident Controller is responsible for managing the incident, including:

- a. Establishing the necessary roles to undertake and manage the incident, including the activation of an Alerts and Warnings Operator and a Public Information Officer;
 - b. Defining the extent and type of message to be delivered;
 - c. Gaining authorisation to issue the alert or warning;
 - d. The activation of supporting emergency management functions.
- 9.2 The management of the incident and the alert or warning process will be undertaken at ESA Incident Management Facilities (ESA HQ Fairbairn) to provide the necessary supporting personnel and infrastructure. The ESA Training facility precinct at Hume can be used as a back-up under the Agency's business continuity planning. The ESAT precinct also houses the back-up Communications Centre.
- 9.3 The ACT Public Information Coordination Centre (PICC) will be activated, when required depending on the significance of the emergency, and if an alert or warning is used due to the potential for a significant number of people receiving messages and the need to support them in

their actions with additional information and advice through other media platforms. This applies to ESA LRAs only.

9.4 Other areas of government may need to be involved in the management of outcomes associated with the use of an alert or warning, for example, when the messages direct the relocation of sections of the community. The ACT Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) will be activated if an alert or warning is used, depending on the significance of the emergency.

9.5 The ESA Emergency Management Duty Officer will undertake whole of government notification if an alert or warning is used.

9.6 Role of the Public Information Officer (PIO)

The PIO will support the Incident Controller in the management of an alert or warning campaign and will coordinate the arrangements to manage the public information requirements associated with the incident.

9.7 These arrangements must commence with the initial decision to use the alert or warning and include the provision of public information through other media channels to support the warning issued.

9.8 An alert or warning may have an impact on E000 and Access Canberra call centres, and these functions need to be notified, and where necessary supported with appropriate information and advice.

9.9 ESA Emergency Management Duty Officers (EMDOs)

The Alerts and Warnings Operator will undertake the technical processing in issuing a warning by using the respective warning software or platform under direction of the Incident Controller or their delegate.

9.10 Where it is deemed relevant to the delivery of an alert or warning, the operator should ensure the Incident Controller or delegate is aware of possible constraints or limitations with the warning platform.

9.11 For the activation of an alert or EMDO, the ESA Operations Branch will maintain a register of operators who are deemed trained and competent as alert or warning Operators, for use by the EMDO and PIO.

9.12 An Alerts and Warnings Operator may also be made available through the EMDO for use on a pre-emptive arrangement based on identified risk factors, such as elevated fire danger conditions or potential flooding.

9.13 Upon request through the EMDO, the ESA may assist in the provision of trained alert or warning Operators to support ACT Policing in delivering a campaign for a policing matter. ACT Policing will have in place internal arrangements for the authorisation and notification of an alert or warning for use in a policing matter. The ESA Commissioner will be advised prior to ACT Policing using an alert or warning capability.

10. MONITORING

- 10.1 Once an alert or warning has been released, real-time monitoring of the transmission of the alert or warning is available. Monitoring will be provided by the ESA Operator using the specific system tool.
- 10.2 Reports on this monitoring will be fed back to the Incident Controller and PIO to facilitate further alert or warning message decisions.

11. ALERTS AND WARNINGS GOVERNANCE

- 11.1 The governance arrangements for the implementation of the Alerts and Warnings Systems are supported by an Alerts and Warnings Working Group (AWWG). An Alerts and Warning Steering Committee (AWSC) has been established to provide strategic direction and project oversight to ensure AWS reporting, policy arrangements, deadlines and deliverables are met.
- 11.2 Management of the ESA Alerts and Warnings systems and infrastructure will be undertaken by the ESA Operations Branch, which will be responsible for:
 - a. coordinating and managing policies dealing with the use of ESA Alerts and Warnings systems in ACT;
 - b. reviewing this guideline and its associated procedures;
 - c. System testing and the contact point for maintenance;
 - d. capture of EA costs including measures for accountability; and
 - e. record-keeping and reporting.
- 11.3 The ACT Alerts and Warnings Handbook consolidates all hazards into a central procedural document. This outlines Alerts and Warning symbology and warning levels, outline the nested warning approach, Australian warning principles, cross border arrangements, warning approvals and workflows for the dissemination of warnings within the ACT.
- 11.4 The handbook is supported by a set of hazard specific operational procedures and be used to document how and when other technology is used to provide warnings in the ACT, including the EA system and in the future the roll out of cell broadcast technology National Messaging System.
- 11.5 Training**

Ongoing training and familiarisation on the use of the Alerts and Warnings systems will be provided to ESA Operators by the ESA Operations Branch.
- 11.6 System Capabilities**

Alerts and Warnings systems provide the ability to send warning messages to the ACT Community. For EA each use of the system will be known as a “**Campaign**”. However, other channels will be used to display

warning information (including the ESA's website) as the primary form of publishing warnings in the ACT.

11.7 Warnings sent in the ACT will utilise pre-planned message templates where appropriate that comply with the National Guidelines and the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP).

11.8 Closure

In consultation with the Incident Controller, the PIC will ensure that the community is clearly advised when the threat has eased or ended.

11.9 Closure of an incident may be undertaken using an alert or warning or other public information mechanisms.