Australian Institute for
Disaster Resilience

AUSTRALIAN DISASTER RESILIENCE HANDBOOK COLLECTION

Warning Republishers

Companion to *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (2021)

Guidance on republishing warnings during emergencies for established
emergency broadcasters, individuals and community members and private
warning publishers or disseminators

Contents

Introduction

This guideline is a companion document to the *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (AIDR 2021). It provides guidance on republishing warnings during emergencies for established emergency broadcasters, individuals and community members and private warning publishers or disseminators. It outlines key considerations for those who may be working with or sharing content for warnings.

The provision of warnings enacts a national commitment to building shared responsibility for disaster resilience, by giving people information to make decisions about their own safety.

Republished warnings can help expand the number and diversity of people that receive official warnings and can assist individuals and communities to take appropriate and timely actions that save lives, livelihoods and property. In the context of warnings republishers, the dissemination of warnings should be encouraged, whether by formal or informal means, subject to a range of key considerations.

Warnings prompt and encourage protective action to minimise the social and economic impacts of an emergency. When republishing warnings, it is therefore, important that:

- the accuracy and timeliness of republished warnings is preserved
- appropriate contextual information – especially relating to the reliability and source of warnings – is properly communicated with republished warnings.

This guideline is intended to be advisory. It is not intended to limit flexibility and individual jurisdictional practice or to impose mandatory requirements. Rather, it should be used to complement any existing Commonwealth, state, territory and local guidelines for warnings republishers and may be adopted into jurisdictional or organisational codes of practice.

The Australian Warning System

Previously, there have been different warning systems for different hazard types across Australia. The Australian Warning System was adopted by ANZEMC in March 2021 and aims to provide a consistent warnings approach.

The system is a three-level scaled warning system and 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 standard warning 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.

To use the Australian Warning System warnings republishers need to abide by Terms and Conditions. These terms and conditions constitute an agreement between the warning republisher and the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, a business unit of AFAC, the National Council for Fire and Emergency Services, concerning access and use of the Australian Warning System. Warnings republishers also need to be aware of their relevant regulation and policies within their jurisdiction and identify and understand the responsibilities and any legal implications including potential liability as warnings republishers. The terms and conditions are as follows:

- The use of the nationally consistent and endorsed Australian Warning System's three warning levels and hazard icons should comply with design guidelines.
- The nationally consistent and endorsed Australian Warning System's action statements should be used, noting they can be contextualised for each hazard within each state or territory.
- Provide current and accurate warnings in a timely manner.
- Address any conflicting information causing confusion in community response. (Official warnings republished hours after they are originally issued can mean people who depend on this source would get the information late which could lead to greater impact and add to the confusion in an emergency).
- Maintain ongoing republishing of warnings throughout an emergency. (Republishing some but not all official warnings may distract impacted people from the regular flow of information from emergency services. People may miss an important update).
- Verify the authenticity and provenance of visual media (e.g. images, videos) before republishing to avoid amplifying inaccurate representations of the situation.
- Be aware of any updates to the Australian Warnings system and guidelines for warnings republishers.

If warnings republishers wish to use the Australian Warning System hazard icons contact the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience: **enquiries@aidr.org.au**

Context

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. Warnings are a specific form of public information which is information that is provided to the public immediately before, during and after an emergency to reduce the potential impact of an emergency or hazard.

The provision of public information and warnings is a priority for any organisation with responsibility for community safety in an emergency (see Figure 1).

The issue of official warnings is primarily the responsibility of various Commonwealth, state, territory and local government authorities. People and organisations across Australia also have an important role to play in the reach and effectiveness of warnings. Partnerships are crucial between all levels of government, emergency services organisations, the community, industry and business, and the media, so that communities receive, share and act upon warnings in an emergency.

Authorities should work with a wide range of warning dissemination groups who are trusted by individuals and communities.

> See *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (AIDR 2021) for further information.

Who provides warnings?

In Australia, each state and territory has specific legislation governing its emergency management arrangements and statutory providers of warnings, including specific roles and responsibilities for the issue of warnings. The Commonwealth also holds warning responsibilities, particularly through the work of the Bureau of Meteorology.

A statutory provider can also be a warnings republisher by republishing another government agency's warning e.g. police may share warnings issued by the State Emergency Service in a major flood, even though they are not the official agency responsible for flood warnings.

Sometimes, warnings originate from sources other than statutory providers (e.g. insurance companies or privately-operated weather services).

The Bureau of Meteorology issues warnings and watch notices, via broadcast media and online, directly to the public for weather warnings (such as severe thunderstorm, high sea, flood and tropical cyclone warnings) and, in conjunction with Geoscience Australia, also issues tsunami warnings.

Why we warn (extract from *Public Information and Warnings* (AIDR 2021))

Warnings save lives and minimise harm by facilitating protective action

Warnings serve and support broader risk management actions, ranging from hazard reduction and response, to ongoing community education and resilience building.

Warnings empower people and foster shared responsibility

Having access to clear public information and warnings about imminent or current emergencies means communities can better understand their risk, consider their personal situation and take protective action.

A mandate and responsibility to warn

Authorities have moral and various legal obligations to do everything they can to protect life and property from the impacts of hazards and emergencies, including through the provision of knowledge and information.

Public value

Effective warnings make a clear contribution to mitigating and minimising the lasting consequences disasters can have on households, businesses and communities.

Community expectation

Communities expect if important information is available, it will be shared promptly and effectively.

What is a warnings republisher?

A warnings republisher is usually one of the following:

Established emergency broadcasters
Radio, television, and online media broadcasters.

Individuals and community members
Community radio stations, Facebook groups, local emergency service units and brigades, local clubs, social media influencers or community members and organisations.

Privately owned warning publishers or disseminators

Global digital service providers (e.g. Google and Facebook offer dedicated emergency response services), insurers, businesses with experience or deep interest in emergency management, and individuals or groups with a passion for communication about emergencies.

Why republishing warnings is important

Warnings republishers may seek to republish and tailor warnings and information for their specific audience or community. It is important that warnings republishers maintain the integrity and intention of official warnings. The republishing of warnings has potential benefits and risks for statutory providers of warnings and the impacted communities the warnings are intended for.

What are the potential benefits of warnings republishers to statutory providers?

- Extended reach: Warnings republishers can access larger audiences to extend the reach of official warning messages. The greater the reach of warnings, the greater the chance of protective action being taken by the impacted community.
- Reduce impact: Official warnings that reach their intended audience can help reduce the impact on emergency service agencies. The more people that follow official calls-to-action warnings, the less likely it is people will be impacted, requiring others to risk their lives to assist them.
- Support validation: Republishing warnings helps impacted people confirm the validity of official information. Hearing the same message from multiple sources has been shown to reinforce its validity.

For further information on calls-to-action see the *Australian Warning System companion document* (AIDR 2021).

What are the potential risks of warnings republishers to statutory providers?

- Delayed delivery: Republishing warnings can take time and affect timely delivery and can cause confusion. Official warnings republished hours after they are originally issued can mean people who depend on this source would get the information late which could lead to greater impact and add to the confusion in an emergency. Messages should address any conflicting information causing confusion in community response.
- Introduction of inaccuracies: Inaccurate republishing of warnings, particularly with the addition of myths, misinformation or dis-information increases the

burden on statutory providers of warnings during emergencies. The more unofficial sources of information being republished during an emergency, the more time and resources need to be dedicated to managing inaccurate information from these sources. Verify the authenticity and provenance of visual media (e.g. images, videos) being circulated to avoid amplifying inaccurate representations of the situation.

What are the potential benefits of warnings republishers to the impacted community?

- Audience reach: Warnings republishers can help reach different types of audiences. For example, not everyone follows the statutory provider's social media page. Impacted communities seek to connect with their peers through a wide variety of their own preferred communication channels.
- Meaningful translation: Warnings republishers can translate warnings into different community languages, which widens the dissemination of the calls-to-action, or reach people with specific support needs.

What are the potential risks of warnings republishers to the impacted community?

- Introduction of inaccuracies: Inaccurate or incomplete republishing of a warning can potentially omit key information relevant to impacted people. If people miss key aspects of a warning, it can jeopardise their ability to prepare and protect their properties and stay safe.
- Distraction: Republishing some but not all official warnings may distract impacted people from the regular flow of information from emergency services. People may miss an important update because they are looking in the wrong place.
- Complacency: Republishing unchanged warnings may be less effective at attracting people's attention.

How warnings are republished

Warnings may be 'republished' through a variety of channels, including (but not limited to) broadcast media, websites, and web-based technologies such as social media, RSS, and smartphone applications. More traditional methods for republishing warnings include such things as community notice boards and newsletters, phone trees and community meetings.

Some community members share warning information, for example, from news and radio outlets, for family and friends in the impacted area. Others forward official warnings through a variety of forms such as social media posts.

Guidelines for warnings republishers

The following are key considerations that provide guidance to warnings republishers. Key considerations for effecting messages can be found in *Choosing Your Words* (AIDR 2021) and further guidance on nationally consistent warning levels, hazard icons and calls-to-action can be found in *Australian Warning System* (AIDR 2021) **https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/public-information-and-warnings-handbook/**.

Established emergency broadcasters

Some media organisations, such as the ABC, have established formal arrangements through Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with emergency management agencies, who are the statutory providers of warnings. Other media organisations have informal relationships in place. Key considerations for established emergency broadcasters include:

- Where possible, establish a formal arrangement with the statutory provider of warnings, for example, through an MoU or similar.

- Consider the robustness of your broadcast platform for republishing. Does it have sufficient capacity to continue to function effectively in times of high demand during emergency events?

- Check the warning is current and is republished in a timely manner.

- Maintain the intent of a warning, this includes both the wording and spatial representation of an official

warning. Take care to correctly replicate or reproduce maps and images.

- Include the original warning's source, date and time of publication.

- Republish any revisions or updates to the original warning, including de-escalation of warnings informing the community the emergency has eased or ceased.

- Consider if the warning message complies with the Australian Government standard for Common Alerting Protocol - Australia Profile (CAP-AU-STD) where required (for further information see box on the Common Alerting Protocol).

- Comply with relevant legislation, regulations or policy, such as privacy and data laws.

- Identify and understand the responsibilities and any legal implications including potential liability as warnings republishers.

Individuals and community members

Individuals and community members have often sought to provide information to their local community during an emergency. Previously this was informal and involved posting information on community message boards, via the activation of local phone trees or through informal community networks.

With the rise in use of social media, the ability for individuals and community members to republish warnings with a greater reach and speed has been made possible. While some individuals and community members do this to help their community access official warnings that may help them prepare for an unfolding emergency, others may seek to republish warnings for personal gain.

If communities and individuals choose to republish warnings, it is important to remember there can be a great deal of public information and warnings over a long period, at any time of day or night. What may start off as something simple can quickly become overwhelming for the uninitiated, so those involved need to consider what is involved and choose a manageable strategy.

Inaccurate warnings have the potential to inadvertently cause harm or create confusion for those impacted, so it is important for individuals and community members, who choose to republish warnings, to take into consideration the following:

- Check the warning is current and is republished in a timely manner.
- Maintain the intent of a warning, this includes both the wording and spatial representation of an official warning. Take care to correctly replicate or reproduce maps and images.
- Include the original warning's source, date and time of publication.
- Republish any revisions or updates to the original warning, including de-escalation of warnings informing the community the emergency has eased or ceased.
- If the warning is from an unofficial source, clearly indicate the source and that it contains unverified information.
- Establish procedures to verify information from unofficial sources, including checking the information against official sources.
- Remove, retract or correct inaccurate or inappropriate content as soon as possible.
- Taking photos or video during an emergency in risky situations is strongly discouraged.
- Have an exit strategy with clear messaging if for any reason it is unable to continue in the middle of an event.
- Identify and understand the responsibilities and any legal implications including potential liability as warnings republishers.

Privately owned warning publishers or disseminators

In recent years, there has been a rise in privately operated weather services, social media platforms providing crisis response services, and insurance companies providing warnings to their policy holders. Where possible, private warning publishers or disseminators should seek to work collaboratively with statutory providers of warnings to enable the best possible outcome for impacted communities.

Key considerations for private warning publishers or disseminators include:

- Consider establishing a prior relationship with the statutory provider of warnings, for example, through an MoU or informal agreement.
- Consider the robustness of your republishing platform. Does it have sufficient capacity to continue to function effectively in times of high demand during emergency events? Keep your user base informed of impending changes.
- Check the warning is current and is republished in a timely manner.
- Maintain the intent of a warning, this includes both the wording and spatial representation of an official warning. Take care to correctly replicate or reproduce maps and images.
- Include the original warning's source, date and time of publication.
- Republish any revisions or updates to the original warning, including de-escalation of warnings informing the community the emergency has eased or ceased.
- If the warning is from an unofficial source, clearly indicate the source and that it contains unverified information.
- Establish procedures to verify information from unofficial sources, including checking the information against official sources.
- Remove, retract or correct inaccurate or inappropriate content as soon as possible.
- Consider if the warning complies with the Australian Government standard for Common Alerting Protocol - Australia Profile (CAP-AU-STD) (see Box 1).
- Comply with relevant legislation, regulations or policy, e.g. privacy and data laws.
- Identify and understand the responsibilities and any legal implications including potential liability as warnings republishers.

See *Public Information and Warnings Handbook* (AIDR 2021) for further information.