

Queensland Standard Emergency Warning Signal

Manual M.1.171



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AMENDMENTS

Proposals for amendment or addition to the content of this Manual are to be forwarded to:

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REVIEW DATE

The Commissioner or authorised representative, QFES is to ensure this Manual and its associated procedures are reviewed annually or as required.





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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Queensland is vulnerable to natural disasters, particularly cyclones, floods, severe weather events and bushfires. Effective community warnings and alert systems are a key component in managing disasters or emergencies and can assist in preventing the loss of life. Community warnings and alerts provide the community with appropriate information, advice and steps to be taken in responding to a disaster or emergency situation. It is important any warning issued is timely, tailored and relevant to the community.

The Queensland Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) Manual (the Manual) provides guidance to all persons and roles involved in the use of SEWS as a community warning messaging tool within Queensland and operating under the *Disaster Management Act 2003*, *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990* and the *Public Safety Preservation Act 1986*.

1.1. Community Warnings and Information

Community warnings, alerts and information support community resilience. When combined with the community's understanding of environmental risks, strong community education and engagement and effective disaster or emergency preparedness, warnings, alerts and information can have the potential to reduce the impacts of disasters or emergencies on communities and protect lives, properties and the environment.¹

Community warnings provide the community with appropriate advice on disaster and emergency situations to enable the community to make informed decisions about preparedness and safety and/or the steps to be taken in responding to a disaster or emergency situation².

Community information is one of five elements of community engagement and its goal is sharing information with and between communities and agencies to come to a mutual understanding. The underpinning principle that everyone is informed and able to take responsibility for decisions and actions.³

A transparent and consistent approach is required when determining what is the most appropriate community warning or alert delivery method to use, then managing the consequences of the community warning and/or alert.

Community warnings, alerts and information can be issued or sourced by a number of methods depending on the type of disaster or emergency situation and/or agency. Queensland's primary community warning, alert and information methods are:

- Information through local government or agency websites and disaster information boards, local events and activities.
- Opt-in alerts from local government which provide SMS, landline, email and social media community messaging.
- Agency specific warnings and/or alerts, for example SunWater, Seqwater, Energex.
- Alerts and information from media outlet broadcasts, including the use of SEWS.
- Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) weather warnings for tropical cyclones, severe thunderstorms, severe weather, tsunami and bushfires.
- Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) fire ban alerts and/or warnings under the *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990*.

¹ [Best Practice Guide for Warning Originators, page 1](#)

² [Best Practice Guide for Warning Originators, page 4](#)

³ [AIDR Handbook 6 National Strategy for Disaster Resilience](#)





- QFES bushfire warnings (Advice: monitor conditions, Watch and Act: conditions are changing and Emergency Warning: you are in danger).
- Emergency Alert (Warning, Watch and Act or Advice).

Community warnings should be timely and to the greatest extent possible, be issued as soon as the appropriate recommendation for protective action can be made. It is important to know when to use a community warning, alert or information.

1.2. Standard Emergency Warning Signal

The SEWS is a wailing siren sound that has been adopted by all States and Territories to alert the community to the broadcast of an urgent safety message relating to an emergency/disaster.

The signal is sounded immediately prior to an emergency warning message being played on public media broadcasts, in the potential or likely impacted areas.

As part of a coordinated national emergency plan, the SEWS is used to attract attention to emergency warnings such as cyclone warnings.

CHAPTER 2: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

2.1. Management of SEWS

Responsibility for the management of SEWS in Queensland rests with the QFES Commissioner in coordination with the Queensland State Manager BoM for meteorological purposes.

2.2. Initiating Authorities

In Queensland, the authority to initiate SEWS warnings is restricted to:

- The BoM State Manager (or nominated delegate) for weather related events only;
- The QFES Commissioner (or nominated delegate) for disaster events and HAZMAT related events; and
- The Queensland Police Service Commissioner (or Senior Officer of a rank no lower than Assistant Commissioner as delegate).

As soon as practicable, the BoM State Manager, QPS or the nominated delegates will formally advise the QFES Commissioner via the State Disaster Coordination Centre (SDCC) Watch Desk that SEWS is initiated.

2.3. Training

Section 16A of the DM Act provides a legislative requirement for the Commissioner, QFES to ensure that persons involved in disaster operations are appropriately trained to maintain or enhance capability under Queensland's disaster management arrangements. Training in Queensland is undertaken by disaster management stakeholders in accordance with the Queensland Disaster Management Training Framework (QDMTF) and includes training relating to community messaging through Module 1 "Introduction to Warning and Alert Systems" and Module 2 "Working with Warning and Alert Systems".

In accordance with the Queensland Disaster Management Training Handbook, it is the responsibility of all disaster management stakeholders to undertake the training relevant to their role. The competency gained through the completion of training has been designed to ensure situational awareness and intelligence inform all relevant decision making associated with warning and alert systems.





SEWS process and familiarisation sessions can be requested through the SDCC Watch Desk for Local Disaster Management Groups, District Disaster Management Groups or State agencies. For further information around SEWS, contact your local Emergency Management Coordinator, QFES.

CHAPTER 3: Use of the SEWS

It is vital that the impact of the warning signal be preserved by ensuring it is used for significant impacts only. The audio signal will only be used:

- To alert listeners/viewers of radio/television, or where appropriate by other means, that an official announcement is about to be made concerning an actual or potential major emergency/disaster likely to affect them; and
- When the public needs to be informed to take, or be prepared to take, specific action in order to protect life, property or the environment.

As a general rule, the following four factors should be present:

1. Potential for loss of life and/or a major threat to a significant number of properties or the large-scale environment.
2. Impact is expected within 12 hours or is occurring at the time.
3. A significant number of people need to be warned.
4. One or more incidents are classified as “destructive”.

The SEWS sound will accompany each priority one Emergency Alert (EA) warning message. EA is an emergency warning system providing the capability to send warning messages to landlines and/or mobile phones based on the registered service address or geographic location within a particular area defined in the EA system. For further information on EA refer to the Queensland Emergency Alert Manual.

3.1 Community and Jurisdictional Preparedness

Prior to and during likely or actual disaster or emergency situations, preparation of communities, particularly around community warning messaging is key in helping to anticipate and manage risks and potentially reduce panic and uninformed decision making. In collaboration with relevant agencies, disaster management groups should ensure community warning preparedness arrangements are considered in relevant plans (e.g. disaster management plans or community engagement plans).

The [Best Practice Guide for Warning Originators](#) provides guidance and considerations on why warn and what to warn about.

Key considerations:

- Do documents describe community warnings and SEWS processes and triggers?
- Do you have arrangements to ensure vulnerable groups in the community and/or transitory members understand the SEWS?
- Is there effective and ongoing community engagement and preparedness programs on community warnings?
- Do arrangements and programs promote shared responsibility and resilience?
- Does the community understand risks in their environment?
- Are agencies exercised in community warnings and processes?





3.2 Eligible Events

It is vital that the status and effectiveness of the SEWS is maintained by limiting its use to significant events only. Such events will be restricted to:

- Wind gusts > 125km/h (for example tropical cyclones of category 2 and above or their wintertime equivalents)
- Storm tide > 0.5m above highest astronomical tide (HAT) (initiating authorities can exercise discretion if there is a significant threat to areas below 0.5m above HAT)
- Large hail > 4cm in diameter (corresponding to > golf ball size)
- Tornado
- Major flood, flash flood or dam failure
- Intense rainfall leading to flash floods or landslides (1-6 hour rainfall total > 50 year average recurrence interval)
- Geo hazards including effects of earthquakes or tsunami waves > 1m (tide dependent)
- Major urban and rural fires
- Major pollution, hazardous material or bio-hazard emergency
- Public safety emergency.

3.3 SEWS Notifications

When a SEWS warning is issued, all initiating authorities must notify the QFES Commissioner, through the SDCC Watch Desk who will then contact the relevant stakeholders, affected by the warning, as per the SDCC Notification Matrix.



3.3.1 Bureau of Meteorology SEWS Broadcast

To alert the media that the use of the SEWS has been authorised, the following text will be included at the head of the warning:

Transmitters serving the area <list> ARE REQUESTED TO USE THE STANDARD EMERGENCY WARNING SIGNAL BEFORE BROADCASTING THIS MESSAGE.

Warnings are allocated a broadcast priority:

- Top priority: For immediate broadcast
- Priority: For broadcast within the hour





- Warnings with no priority are not labelled.

Note: all warnings authorising the use of the SEWS are top priority. However not all top priority warnings warrant the use of the SEWS.

3.3.2 SEWS broadcasts other than weather or flood related

The initiating authority will ensure the relevant media outlets are contacted by whatever means are deemed appropriate and will immediately confirm all details in writing to the media outlets by email and/or fax.

The request for broadcast of an emergency announcement using SEWS will contain details of the message, information as to when broadcasts are to commence and how frequently they should be repeated, as well as the localities in which they should be broadcast.

Requests for a SEWS broadcast will contain the name and appointment of the appropriate initiating authority and will also contain relevant telephone contact numbers so that confirmation of information can be undertaken by the broadcaster.

3.4 Message Format

EMERGENCY ANNOUNCEMENT

This is an official emergency announcement for *(insert appropriate area)* issued by *(insert appropriate authority)* concerning *(insert type of emergency)*

SEWS messages should contain the following details and indicate that they should be read verbatim:

- What has happened
- What has been done to date
- Where it happened
- What is proposed to be done
- When it happened
- Any public safety instructions/messages/directions
- Who authorised the message.

Messages should close with the following statement:

This emergency announcement was issued by *(insert appropriate authority)*. Stay tuned to this station for further information.

An example message to broadcast outlets is in Appendix 1.

3.5 Media Instructions

On receipt of a written request to issue a warning, the media are expected to:

- Confirm the message is not a hoax by calling the number given (if in doubt).
- Begin the broadcast by playing the SEWS for 15 seconds.
- Broadcast the Emergency Announcement verbatim.

The broadcast of the SEWS, followed by the Emergency Announcement is to be repeated twice at five-minute intervals, unless requested otherwise by the initiating authority. Cancellation of the request is to be confirmed by the initiating authority.





APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLE MESSAGE TO BROADCAST OUTLETS

(EXAMPLE ONLY)

Bureau of Meteorology
Queensland Regional Office

Transmitters serving the area Townsville and adjacent inland are REQUESTED TO USE THE STANDARD EMERGENCY WARNING SIGNAL BEFORE BROADCASTING THIS MESSAGE.

TOP PRIORITY FOR IMMEDIATE BROADCAST

SEVERE THUNDERSTORM WARNING
for DAMAGING WIND and HEAVY RAINFALL

For people in parts of the Herbert and Lower Burdekin Forecast District.

Issued at 7:57 pm Monday, 8 February 2016.

Severe thunderstorms are likely to produce damaging winds and heavy rainfall that may lead to flash flooding in the warning area over the next several hours.

Locations which may be affected include Townsville, Ayr, Mingela, Giru, Alva Beach and Rollingstone.

Aplins Weir has recorded 91mm in 30 minutes, and 128mm in an hour.

Annandale has recorded 62mm in 30 minutes.

Calcium recorded 60mm in 30 minutes, and 99mm in 1 hour.

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services advise that people should:

- * Move your car under cover or away from trees.
- * Secure loose outdoor items.
- * Never drive, walk or ride through flood waters. If it's flooded, forget it.
- * Seek shelter, preferably indoors and never under trees.
- * Avoid using the telephone during a thunderstorm.
- * Beware of fallen trees and powerlines.
- * For emergency assistance contact the SES on 132 500.

The next warning is due to be issued by 11:00 pm.

Warnings are also available through TV and Radio broadcasts, the Bureau's website at www.bom.gov.au or call 1300 659 219. The Bureau and Queensland Fire and Emergency Services would appreciate warnings being broadcast regularly. Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology Queensland.

