

CASE STUDY

Cross-border collaboration during a crisis: Restoring connectivity after the New England Highway bushfire closure

Local disaster management groups and state agencies collaborated to quickly reopen the New England Highway between Tenterfield and Warwick (encompassing the border towns of Jennings and Wallangarra) on 2 November 2023, ensuring community connectivity and access to essential services after severe bushfires.

Twin towns, one community

The towns of Wallangarra, Queensland, in the Southern Downs local government area, and Jennings, New South Wales (NSW), in the Tenterfield local government area are twin towns divided by the Queensland and NSW border. Together the towns make one community - people live, work and attend school on either side of the border. Essential services, such as electricity and water, are provided to both sides of the border by one of the two states.

Bushfire emergency unfolds

In late October 2023, the areas around the towns were impacted by multiple severe bushfires. A rapidly unfolding bushfire on 31 October forced the closure of two sections of the New England Highway - both south and north of Jennings and Wallangarra - effectively isolating the small community. It was the first time in approximately 20 years both local government areas were affected by the same natural hazard.

Cross-border collaboration in action

Strong relationships and collaboration between the two disaster management groups sharing a border enhanced the interoperability to enable a quick response to a cross-border bushfire.

The Southern Downs Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) and the Emergency Operation

Centre (EOC) at Glen Innes Fire Control Centre worked together to manage the risks and share information about the rapidly unfolding bushfire emergency. Deteriorating conditions prompted an emergency alert at 2pm, advising Wallangarra residents to leave immediately. At 2.18pm it was replaced with a new emergency alert for the township to seek shelter immediately due to the speed of the fire.

School children impacted by road closures

The increasing smoke hazard along the New England Highway prompted the former Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) to advise the LDMG of the intention to close the highway at approximately the same time “the seek shelter immediately” alert was issued. Concurrently, the acting principal of St Joseph’s School Stanthorpe contacted impacted families about the likely highway closure after liaising with the local bus company and emergency services. Students at another school were also unable to return home to Tenterfield.

The collaboration between the LDMG and the school principals ensured appropriate care arrangements were made, demonstrating coordination and capability integration to support the affected young people until the highway reopened.



*New England Highway just outside of Wallangarra.
Photo credit: Southern Downs Regional Council*

Isolations and service disruptions

The highway was closed at 2.15pm. No one at the time anticipated the duration of the highway closure and that it would impact both states. Local supermarkets were unable to be restocked and other essential services, such as fuel for the local petrol stations, were also affected. The loss of a house at Wallangarra was reported at 6.40pm, and the roads surrounding Jennings were closed due to the fires. By 7pm on 31 October, Wallangarra experienced a power outage, which disrupted telecommunications. The fires also caused a power outage that left the Beehive Dam water treatment plant unable to supply water to the towns of Wallangarra and Jennings.

Water conservation emergency alert

The Southern Downs LDMG coordinated with the EOC to issue an emergency alert at around 7.17pm advising residents to conserve water and cease non-essential use because water was expected to be depleted within two hours. The polygons of both emergency alerts encompassed the townships of Wallangarra and Jennings. This coordination demonstrates a highly integrated capability across borders in ensuring consistent and clear messaging during emergencies.

Telecommunications at risk

The National Broadband Network (NBN) tower at Wallangarra was using back up battery power at 8pm, and the battery operation was limited to eight hours. The fires continued to burn and further warnings were issued to the residents of both townships.

Highway reopening

Plans to reopen the highway started late on 1 November 2023 and prioritised the safe return of the impacted students to their families. Many of these young people and their families had previously experienced bushfires. The planning process also included how to best manage the psychological impact on the young people travelling through an active fireground.

A coordinated reopening strategy aimed to minimise disruptions from potential closures along the route due to fire or weather conditions. This careful planning also allowed community members trapped on either side of the border to travel without being turned back mid-route.

Relevant agencies discussed the reopening early on 2 November and an inspection of the highway by engineers with the support of the Queensland Police Service (QPS), the former QFES and the Southern Downs LDMG was approved. Reopening the highway required a thorough risk assessment, including fallen trees, damaged power infrastructure along the highway and general travel conditions. This thorough risk management and assessment process reflects strong capability integration, as agencies worked together to ensure safety and functionality along the reopened route.

The final steps to reopening

The inspection revealed an overhead telecommunication line was at risk of falling across the highway from a burning pole. Telstra approved the removal of the pole which enabled approval for the highway to be reopened at 1.45pm on 2 November 2023. Collaboration and coordination with the QPS, the Department of Transport and Main Roads, Ergon Energy, Telstra, the former QFES

and NSW authorities enabled the highway to be reopened within 30 minutes at each end of the New England Highway.

The number of active fires and impacted roads provided a limited window for a portable generator and technician to travel from NSW to Wallangarra to restore telecommunication services and to reunite the young people with their families.

Supporting families through the reopening

The schools were kept informed throughout the clearing process to ensure transport arrangements for the students could be organised. The families were reunited within the brief two-hour window before the highway was closed again in response to a renewed bushfire threat.

Identified lessons strengthen collaboration

It was acknowledged that strong relationships and shared commitment among all entities led to a more effective and efficient response, allowing barriers to be addressed swiftly. Improved information sharing was a direct outcome of lessons identified from the 2019 bushfires which impacted these local governments. These shared lessons highlighted the importance of providing clear and consistent messaging across the border, to help residents understand what actions they needed to take.



The remains of a truck trailer that got caught in the New England Highway bushfire. Photo credit: Southern Downs Regional Council

Following the 2023 event, representatives of the Southern Downs LDMG and Tenterfield Local Emergency Management Committee began attending each other's meetings. Both participate in cross-border exercises to integrate capabilities and clarify their roles and responsibilities for all hazards, not just bushfires. They also participate in the review of each other's disaster management plans to take account of the different authorising environments, strengthening collaboration, coordination, and capability integration for future emergency preparedness.

This case study has been developed in collaboration with Southern Downs Regional Council, Tenterfield Shire Council, Southern Queensland Region, Department of Transport and Main Roads and St Joseph's School Stanthorpe.



Our case studies explore how shared responsibilities, a core element of the [Standard for Disaster Management in Queensland](#), are applied in practice.

They highlight positive work of disaster professionals and researchers, serving as educational resources to enhance disaster management and share knowledge across the sector.

More information

- [Standard for Disaster Management in Queensland](#)
- [23-24 Severe Weather Season Review | Report 1: 2024-25](#)

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