Statewide Guideline – Sandbags

This document outlines guidelines for the procurement, storage, distribution, use and disposal of sandbags during flood emergencies.

1. Introduction

The Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) is the control agency for flood emergencies. VICSES’ responsibilities include the management of the state-wide procurement and storage of sandbags for flood emergencies. This includes providing sandbags to local areas for distribution based on the requirements identified in the Municipal Flood Emergency Plan (MFEP).

The final report of the 2010/2011 Victorian Flood Review observed that during the floods there was inadequate access to sandbags and a lack of knowledge about the filling and use of sandbags. VICSES also noted similar problems during the 2012 North East floods.

Prior to the development of this guideline, sandbag management was not regulated and there was no formal arrangement in place to define the roles and responsibilities for funding the procurement, storage, use and distribution of sandbags.

VICSES, in conjunction with Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and local councils, has developed this guideline to assist emergency managers and the community to plan for effective use of sandbags during flood emergencies.

Emergency managers are guided by the state strategic control priorities for flood emergencies. Incident Controllers will apply the strategic control priorities when considering the supply and distribution of sandbags to the community in preparation for and during flood emergencies (Refer to Section 8).

2. Purpose

The guideline will assist in ensuring that a consistent approach to the procurement, storage, distribution, safe use and disposal of sandbags is applied at a state level. Further, it is intended to assist in the development of regional and local sandbag guidelines and agreements.

3. Use of sandbags for flood emergencies

Sandbags can be used to block doorways, drains and other openings into properties as well as to weigh-down manhole covers, garden furniture and to block sinks, toilets and bath drains to prevent water backing up. They have proven to be successful in keeping water out for short periods of time.

Sandbagging is not always the most effective option and should be considered in the context of a Flood Emergency Plan which includes alternatives for managing flood risk. Other alternatives include moving possessions to higher places, securing objects so they do not float away and placing valuables in water tight containers. The Incident Controller and operational staff in the flood affected community will assess the overall risk to communities and allocate sandbag resources based on risk.
Sandbags have also been used as temporary levees through the construction of sandbag walls.

**This guideline does not address the use of sandbags in the construction of temporary levees.**

### 4. Partnership arrangements

The success of this guideline is dependent on establishing strong partnerships at the regional and local level between local councils, CFA, MFB and DEPI to support the sandbag management arrangements. Local councils have a key role to assist VICSES through the flood emergency planning process and their ability to support operations.

Operational arrangements for the procurement, storage and distribution of sandbags at the local and regional level will be included as an appendix in the MFEP. VICSES is responsible for leading the development of the MFEP.

**Responsibilities**

VICSES responsibilities include:

- The management of the state-wide procurement and storage of sandbags for flood emergencies
- Providing sandbags to local areas for distribution based on requirements identified in the MFEP
- Identifying distribution arrangements in the MFEP
- Community education and awareness on sandbag management and safe use
- Identifying Critical Infrastructure and Community Critical Facilities in the MFEP
- Providing a support role in flood recovery.

Council responsibilities include:

- Supporting VICSES in developing the MFEP
- Providing a support role during flood response
- Identifying Community Critical Facilities at a municipal level
- Procuring sandbags to protect council owned facilities including Community Critical Facilities managed by council
- Providing locations, plant and equipment, where available and capable, to support sandbagging operations as agreed in the MFEP
- Coordinating the clean-up and community recovery arrangements (refer to Section 9).

Community Critical Facility owners’ responsibilities include:

- Working with VICSES to develop an effective flood mitigation plan for their property as part of the MFEP with a priority for permanent structures.

Other ‘Response’ agencies responsibilities include:

- Supporting VICSES in their response role.

Residential and commercial property owners’ responsibilities include:

- Understanding their own flood risk
- Preparing an emergency plan for their home or business
- Procurement and storage of sandbags to protect their own property
- Filling and movement of sandbags for to protect their property
- Following advice from their local council regarding the removal of sandbags from their property, as part of the community recovery.
5. Community and business education about sandbags

VICSES has an established community education program to support community and business in responding to flood emergencies (see www.ses.vic.gov.au/prepare/floodsafe).

VICSES will use the existing community education tools and programs (such as the Local Flood Guides and the FloodSafe program) to promote:

- Practical information on:
  - The purpose, use and disposal of sandbags (see www.ses.vic.gov.au/prepare/floodsafe/floodsafe-resources/sandbag-reference-guide)
  - Obtaining sandbags
  - Safety considerations e.g. OHS, manual handling, safe use and disposal
  - Alternative flood mitigation strategies to sandbagging
  - Where to get information – Phone 1300 842 737 for the VICSES Information Line.

- The responsibilities of critical infrastructure owners, businesses and private individuals to understand their flood risk and develop a flood plan

- Key messages:
  - Emergency response agencies will not always have the capacity to provide sandbags due to other competing priorities
  - Businesses and individuals need to understand the flood risk to their property and, where appropriate, develop a Flood Emergency Plan
  - Sandbagging is only one way of protecting properties against floodwater and not always the most effective option. Sandbagging should be considered in the context of a Flood Emergency Plan which considers alternatives for managing flood risk.

6. Procurement of sandbags

VICSES will maintain a supply of sandbags to support the effective readiness and response to flood emergencies as identified in MFEPs.

The number of sandbags required at a State and regional level will be determined from information provided through the MFEP planning process. There may be occasions where the supply of sandbags is limited and priorities for distribution will need to be determined through local emergency management arrangements.

VICSES will maintain the current cross-border and mutual aid arrangements for flood emergencies. VICSES will also work with local councils to access the resource sharing arrangements established between councils during emergencies.

7. Storage of sandbags

Sandbags will be stored by VICSES in appropriate locations across Victoria. Through the application of risk based assessments, VICSES will work with councils to identify the quantities of sandbags required. This process will be aligned to the MFEP review cycle.

Sandbags will normally be located in a VICSES facility. Arrangements to store sandbags in other facilities will be identified as part of the local MFEP planning process.

VICSES will monitor the condition of all its sandbags for deterioration.
8. Distribution of sandbags

Priorities for sandbags during flood emergencies

The Incident Controller may make sandbags and sand available for flood mitigation activities during declared flood emergencies.

Sandbags will be issued consistent with the Strategic Control Priorities within the State Flood Emergency Plan, in the following order of priority to protect:

1. Critical Infrastructure and Community Critical facilities identified:
   (a) in the MFEP or
   (b) by the Incident Management Team

2. Residential properties identified in the potential flood area

3. Commercial properties identified in the potential flood area

4. Environmental and conservation areas identified in the potential flood area.

Properties identified as being outside the potential flood area, will be referred to an alternative source of sandbags (e.g. local hardware store or sandbag supplier) by VICSES.

Distribution points

In preparation for a significant flood emergency, VICSES will work with local councils and other agencies to identify appropriate locations for sandbag collection points. Location considerations will include access, safety, human resources and machinery requirements. These locations and local arrangements will be identified in the MFEP.


As part of the response arrangements, the Incident Controller will track the distribution of sandbags through the Incident Management Team (IMT). This information will be provided to the recovery team as part of the transition from response to recovery.

Provision of sand

VICSES will have plans in place to acquire sand through its own supply arrangements and where necessary through the emergency management arrangements. These arrangements will be identified in the MFEP. Sand suppliers may be identified in the MFEP.

9. Disposal and relocation of used sandbags

Sandbags may be contaminated after use and local councils should ensure that clean up and disposal is considered as part of recovery. Removal and disposal of sandbags used for flood mitigation shall be dealt with under the clean up and community recovery arrangements as outlined in the Emergency Management Manual Victoria. The disposal of sandbags is a shared responsibility between different agencies.

Incident Controllers will provide information on sandbag locations to councils, to assist with clean-up. VICSES will continue to work with relevant agencies to develop protocols for the safe and environmentally responsible disposal of sandbags.
10. Transitioning to this guideline

Successful implementation of this guideline may take several years and progress will be reviewed periodically. VICSES will introduce a process for including the local area arrangements for sandbag management in the MFEP. This process will then be rolled out as each MFEP is reviewed.

11. Floodsafe weblinks


12. Further information

Contact:

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