



WHAKARATONGA IWI

**FIRE
EMERGENCY**

NEW ZEALAND

THE COMBUSTIBLE SUMMER: 2023-24



The elevator pitch



Context

Before 2017 the NZ Fire Service and the Rural Fire Authorities borrowed PIMs from councils / DOC

- ☺ strong local relationships
- ☹ no consistency of approach or certainty of availability
- ☹ supported a mindset that PIM was an optional extra

Media team provided most of our PIM capability

After Port Hills (2017) and Pigeon Valley (2019) FENZ made an effort to create in-house capability

- Training course developed 2019
- Training gathered momentum from 2021
- NISWE reinforced the need

Context

Our Intent:

1. Trained PIMs in every district and region and a national pool available as surge capacity.
2. PIM capability to operate at every level:
 - Incident management team (PIM on the incident ground)
 - Coordination centres – local / regional / national
3. Harness the collective power of our national comms team in support of our PIMs

Currently: 58 trained PIMs incl 16 in the surge capacity pool, 5 qualified to manage a team in a major incident

Context

- Communications Centres are the first touchpoint for media
- Comcen can page the on-call media advisor
 - Media team available 24/7
 - Support remotely and can deploy
 - Support social media on our district FB pages
- Incident Controller can activate a local PIM
 - the media team acts as the media liaison PIM function + social media / website on request
 - Internal comms + strat comms support from the national comms team

The combustible summer

1 Oct 2023 – 31 Mar 2024

465 medium and large vegetation fires

32 took 24+ hours to extinguish

15 were in Te Ihu region

10 of those were in Canterbury



The dress rehearsal 19-20 January

- Amberley (Hurunui District)
 - Loburn (Waimakariri District)
 - Evacuations
 - Homes and commercial property lost
 - Immediate media interest
 - Two councils
 - Swannanoa (Waimakariri District)
-
- A PIM deployed to each fireground
 - RCC stood up with a remote PIM
 - National media team supported remotely



The dress rehearsal

Debriefed – what went well

- Early handover from comcen enabled quick media response
- Media team realised on-ground PIM was needed
- IC was receptive
- Contact with Council PIMs early – existing relationships
- Regular updates on each org's socmed
- Regional overview as well as incident-specific information
 - widespread risk of further fires
 - need for caution
 - Every rural community should be prepared

The dress rehearsal

Debriefed – what could be improved

- Some confused messaging: evacuations, cordons and welfare centres
- Inter-council situational awareness of each other's fires – residents in both areas watching anxiously
- Some contact lists were out of date
- Need to acknowledge uncertainty in public messaging (eg evac centres are being set up, but that the venue is still TBC)
- More depth in our PIM capability
- Our community engagement with evacuees was siloed from the rest of PIM
- No clear structure, role confusion between RCC and IMT PIMs

The dress rehearsal

- Actions completed within a week
 - Canterbury District agreed to establish more definite triggers for deploying PIM
 - Set up a WhatsApp group with our two lead Canterbury PIMs, RCC PIM and the council PIMs in Hurunui and Waimakariri
 - Refreshed the contact lists
- Still to be done on 14 Feb
 - Reconnect the community engagement function with the rest of PIM
 - Extend the connections with councils to the other local authorities
 - Find more PIMs for our RCC

A photograph of a wildfire scene. In the foreground, two firefighters in yellow gear are working on a large log. In the background, a helicopter is flying in the sky, and a large plume of white smoke rises from the fire. The scene is set in a wooded area with trees and a clear blue sky.

27 Jan – 8 Feb

Six more significant wildfires from Dargaville to Otago + Green Gorilla

- PIMs on the ground for most
- Proactive media liaison and more social media
- Better connections with council PIMs
- Inconsistent transitions: ComCen → media team → PIMs

13:00 (2024-02-14)



Cafe Rock - West view

13:00 (2024-02-14)



Cafe Rock - South view

13:00 (2024-02-14)



Snakobs - South view

Port Hills wildfire 14 February 2024

Port Hills 14 February 2024

- 2.12pm 111 call received – vegetation fire on Worsleys Track
- 2.40pm evacuations being considered
- 3.40pm first EMA issued
- Second EMA issued about an hour later
- 6.13pm Christchurch City and Selwyn District declare states of emergency
- Over 100 homes evacuated
- Fireground in full view of the city

The legacy of February 2017

Port Hills residents affected by fire evacuation frustrated at lack of information



NZ Herald

18 Feb, 2017 11:26 AM ⌚ 3 mins to read

Canterbury Port Hills fires response confused with bad public communication - independent review

MARTIN VAN BEYNEN

Last updated 10:04, November 3 2017



News [Radio](#) Podcasts Series Topics

Te Ao Māori Pacific IndoNZ 中文

CIVIL DEFENCE / CANTERBURY

Port Hills homeowners frustrated by 'poor communication'

From [Checkpoint](#), 5:12 pm on 17 February 2017

Share this



The legacy

Collective PTSD

2017 fire

- Destroyed 9 homes
- Damaged 5 homes
- Burnt 1660 ha
- Took 2 months to put out

Community, political and organisational memories of Port Hills 2017 were still strong and unhappy.

All eyes were on us



Our intent ...

Do much better this time



Port Hills 14 February 2024

Initial actions

- First Facebook post 15 minutes after the initial 111 call
- First media update issued in 45 minutes
- First media standup with the Controller 5.30pm
- First community meeting that evening
- Began liaising with partner agencies
 - Health NZ
 - CDEM and Councils
- Updated our Minister + Board Chair



Firefighters responding to Port Hills fire

Port Hills 14 February 2024

- PIM scaled up quickly – by evening we had:
 - One on the fireground
 - One liaising with residents
 - One in the RCC liaising with CDEM and the Council PIMs
 - 2-3 of the national media team remotely for media liaison + social media
 - One in NHQ liaising with our CE and the Minister's office
 - One on a plane from Wellington to Christchurch
 - One preparing to deploy from Nelson to Christchurch

Our intent

Reach all those affected – directly or indirectly – with accurate, relevant, timely and clear information throughout the response and the transition to recovery.

- People understood what was happening
- They knew whether or not they were directly or indirectly at risk, or not at all
- They knew what to do, where to get help, and how to stay informed
- Consistent touchpoints with Fire and Emergency NZ

...

Our intent

Community and stakeholders could see their interests were acknowledged

Public and governance were confident that we were responding effectively

Collaborate with partner agency PIMs

- Demonstrate unity of purpose
- Consistent messages
- Leverage each other's channels



Media liaison

- Regular updates (29)
- Daily stand-ups with the Controller
- Escorted access to the fireground regularly from day 2
- Facilitated interviews with firefighters and air ops
- WhatsApp group for on-ground media
- Front-footed difficult issues
 - The loss of a dwelling, which media knew before we did



Community engagement

- Daily briefings for evacuees until they had returned home
 - Key points from each meeting shared on our FB page
 - Media able to attend most meetings
- Our mobile community hub positioned at the main cordon
 - Managed access for evacuees to retrieve essentials
 - Other agencies also based at the hub
- Combined CDEM, Council, Fire and Emergency letterbox drop for householders within the cordons and returned evacuees



Social media

Canterbury District FB page

- Post updates
- Shared photos and videos to show what we were doing
- Engaged with people messaging us seeking reassurance, offering help, looking for advice, showing appreciation
- First post was updated 7 times – shared 547 times, attracted 263 comments, reached over 138,000 people



Social media

Monitored community social media channels to understand public sentiment and identify emerging issues

- Nightly posts about overnight activities to counter anxiety:
- Help recreational users understand why their Port Hills playground was still off limits.

Meet the Port Hills night shift. While you're sleeping, firefighters from six volunteer brigades and two of our career fire stations will be patrolling the fire ground and carrying out structure protection. They're supported by the Incident Management Team based in our Command Unit, where we also liaise with Police as they carry out reassurance patrols in the area. Shout out to the crews from [Leeston Volunteer Fire Brigade](#), [Sumner Volunteer Fire Brigade](#), [Spencerville Fire & Emergency](#), [Lyttelton Volunteer Fire Brigade](#), [Diamond Harbour Volunteer Fire Brigade](#), [Governors Bay Volunteer Fire Brigade](#) and [Pines Kairaki Volunteer Fire Brigade](#) and the Anzac and Ilam fire stations who are keeping you safe tonight.



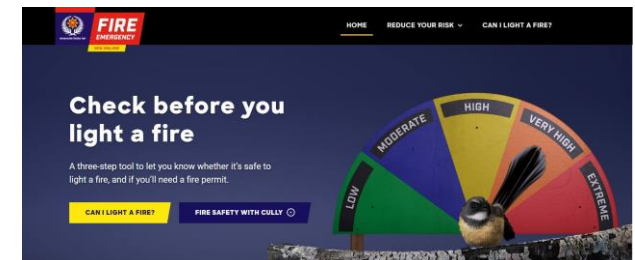
· February 17 · 🌐

Here's an update for all the night owls, wondering what the buzzing noise and flashing lights are above the Port Hills tonight. Our specialist drone team is on the job, using thermal cameras to pinpoint the location of hotspots that firefighters will be targeting in the morning. We also have crews patrolling the fireground tonight, so don't be surprised if you see flashing lights moving around on the hills either. From about 5.30am a helicopter will be flying the 24km perime... [See more](#)



Websites

- Directed people to Council channels they were accustomed to visiting
 - Christchurch City Council’s “Newsline”
 - Selwyn District Council website
 - Canterbury CDEM Group
- Linked to our website for wildfire preparedness



Stakeholder liaison

Our RCC PIM was the main point of contact for PIMs in other agencies

- CDEM Group PIM
- Christchurch City and Selwyn District PIMs
- Public Health
- Christchurch Adventure Park
- MPI
- DOC
- Supported our internal stakeholders
 - Chief Executive and Executive Leadership Team
 - Region Manager
 - Minister's Office and Board Chair
- VIP visits
 - Ministers of CDEM and Internal Affairs (two visits)
 - Prime Minister

The gnarly bits

- Cordon management
 - Not always good comms between PIM and ops
- Liaison with some agencies could have been tighter
 - MPI flagged an issue about access for animal welfare
- Media going rogue on the fireground
 - Too many journos, not enough minders
 - Karma – lost carkeys
- Having another major fire start at Waikari 4 days later
 - Stretched our resources
 - Potential for confusion on our FB page with updates
- Didn't have a clear plan to work to for too long
 - Reactive rather than proactive

How did we do?

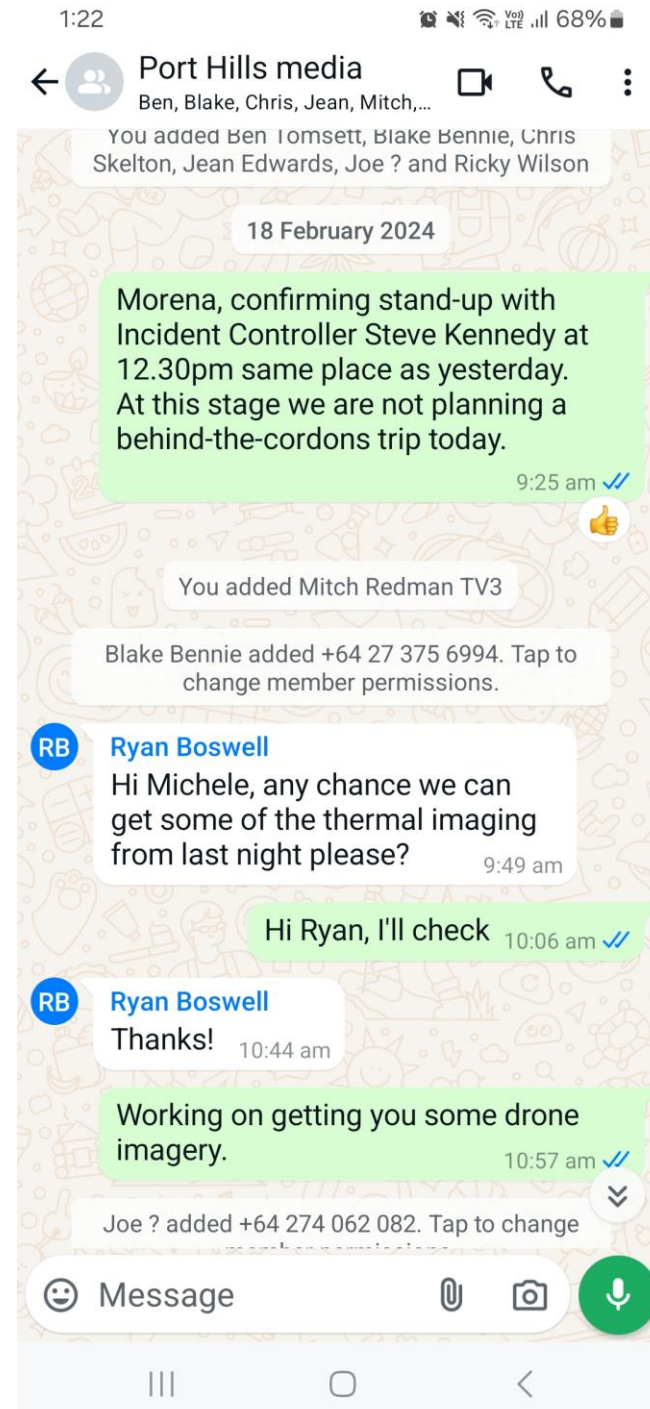
Media told us

- We were too slow on day 1
 - Updates not frequent enough
 - Three hours before the first stand-up
 - They didn't know our POC on the ground on day 1
- Inconsistent cordon access for media between Fire and Police
- Inconsistent approach to media attending evacuees' meetings
- Didn't give weight to RNZ's role as lifelines broadcaster
- Refused access through cordons to interview returned evacuees at home
- Slow getting information for backgrounders as the response wound down

How did we do?

Media told us

- After day 1 their needs for updates were well met
- Regular access to the fireground to film
- The right spokespeople for what they wanted
- Facilitated interviews with firefighters
- WhatsApp group



How did we do?

- Community told us
 - Much better than last time
 - Social media sentiment overwhelmingly positive
 - Relationships with residents developed in the last seven years paid off

“we feel supported and informed”

“can see that you have learned from the last fire”

“these updates are good practical information I can rely on”

- Stakeholders told us
 - Much better than last time
 - Political approval

How did we do?

Independent review commissioned by CDEM Group

- Community and information were at the heart of the response
- Pre-existing relationships enabled quick responses and effective cooperation

Areas for improvement

- Start multi-agency briefings immediately
- Better understanding of each other's internal comms / PIM structures
- Pay more attention to the needs of the thousands of residents not threatened by the fire but who were within the smoke zone or were anxious

How did we do?

Fire and Emergency's Operational Review

- Pending

Our own PIM debrief identified 18 areas to work on

- Simple fixes
- Longer-term
- Needing wider buy-in

Where to from here?

Continue to build our PIM capability

- Train, exercise, mentor and support
- Consolidate our nascent PIM community of practice
- Create resources for our PIMs – toolkit with templates, contact lists, checklists, message banks
- Identify and address the barriers to deployment
- Connect more with CDEM and other agencies' PIMs to build networks and relationships
- Redevelop our PIM training programme to include progression and specific training for regional and national coordination centre PIMs
- Create an Emergency Strategic Communications capability