

Taking protective action during floods and storms

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Public safety messages for floods and storms will be broadcast on ABC Radio in an initiative backed by Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC research.

New community service announcements are the first-ever nationally agreed public flood and storm risk messages in Australia. Comprising of 26 different public messages, they are the result of findings from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC project in flood-risk communication. This research was conducted by Associate Professor Melanie Taylor from Macquarie University and was endorsed by AFAC, the national council for fire and emergency services in Australia and New Zealand.¹

The set of community service announcements are designed to give communities information and advice about protective actions they can take when threatened or effected by floods and severe storms. The project was assisted by the creation of a National Flood CSA Working Group that comprised of representatives from the Bureau of Meteorology and State Emergency Services from all states and territories with responsibility for response in floods. The project was facilitated and supported by AFAC through the AFAC SES Community Safety Group.

Former AFAC Director Risk and Resilience, Amanda Leck, said, 'Developing nationally consistent flood messaging is a significant achievement for the emergency services sector. These messages will minimise harm and save lives by ensuring that the ABC is able to communicate key messages to communities during floods.'

'The fact that these messages are based on research and evidence has meant that emergency services agencies across Australia have been willing and able to collaborate to achieve these nationally consistent messages,' she said.

Community service announcements for flooding are used by the ABC before, during and after floods and severe storms and radio broadcasts are typically around 30 seconds in duration. They contain high-level, general advice and support to listeners and contribute to public safety in floods

and storms. They can also be linked to form longer public information segments to provide breaks in rolling emergency broadcasting.

Although the ABC had an existing set of announcement for floods and storms, these could only be used in particular combinations and there was the potential for confusion. An important requirement of this project was to produce a comprehensive and harmonised set of announcements that the ABC could use nationally.

Patrick Hession, Emergency Broadcast Lead at the ABC, said, 'The best way to reach audiences is by giving simple, consistent messages and delivering them regularly.'

'For example, warning people about the dangers of driving through flood water is a goal that all agencies are working towards. It makes sense to simplify the message so that a person receives the same message no matter which side of a state border they are on,' he said.

The development of the community service announcement comprised 3 stages:

1. Scoping - consensus decision-making was used to identify and prioritise message topics and content areas. The goal of this stage was to reach consensus on the content areas and message elements.
2. Co-development and iterative review - messages were co-created and iterative reviews were conducted to produce a provisional set of messages to test. The draft messages went through 3 rounds of review with CSA Working Group members and ABC representatives until a set of agreed messages was finalised.
3. Testing and finalising - messages were tested through focus groups with members of the public and a review with the CSA Working Group to refine the messages based on feedback to produce the final set of announcements.



Floodwaters cover Rosalie Village, Brisbane, Queensland.

Image: Angus Veitch (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Mr Hession said, 'this process has given me a much greater understanding of the thought processes that people might go through when they are making potentially risky decisions. This led to the development of messages that can be broadcast at times where people will be making these decisions. Messages were informed by research to better argue against the temptation or motivation that people might have to make risky choices. It's been a great experience'.

At the end of the project, a set of 26 flood community service announcements was approved, including messages that can be used in all phases of floods and storms in the context of escalating and rolling emergency broadcasts on ABC local radio.

Associate Professor Melanie Taylor said, 'This project enabled me to use our research findings and combine them with the expertise of a great team of emergency communicators to produce messages that resonate with the public. This will hopefully lead to greater public safety in floods and storms.

'As a researcher, it has been a great experience to work with such an engaged set of stakeholders and end-users to translate research findings into outputs that will help protect communities. It was really exciting to hear our messages produced professionally and slotted into the ABC Emergency intro - and outro - wording; ready for use,' she said.

Six community service announcements relate to risks and contexts associated with driving through flood water and 4 relate to playing in floodwater. These are the behaviours most associated with flood fatalities. A further 4 relate to animal ownership and 4 provide information about the meanings or nature of warnings and alerts. The remainder cover topics

around home preparation, safety considerations when cleaning up after flooding, information about what to do if you are trapped by rising floodwater or are considering staying when advised to leave, and messages about flash flooding and the implications of flooding upstream.

The suite of messages has been recorded by the ABC and distributed to ABC Radio teams around Australia. They are being used by the ABC's local on-air teams when appropriate.

Information about the development of the community service announcements is in the Development of a national set of Community Service Announcements for Flood Risk² and the final report.³

The Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC Research into practice brief series provides concise summaries of the research findings.⁴

Endnotes

1. AFAC National community safety announcements for flood risk communication. At: www.afac.com.au/insight/doctrine/article/current/afac-national-community-safety-announcements-for-flood-risk-communication.
2. Development of a national set of Community Service Announcements for flood risk. At: www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/guide-fact-sheet/8267.
3. Development of a national set of Community Service Announcements for flood risk Final Report. At: www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-8283.
4. Research into practice brief series. At: www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/practicebriefs.