Heatwaves and Tasmania
What happened last summer?

Tasmania’s new heat alert system and heatwave incident response plan were piloted over the summer of 2013-14. The alert system was designed to give public health officials an early warning of approaching heatwaves which could affect the health and wellbeing of Tasmanians, especially those vulnerable to the effects of extreme heat. The response plan allowed for a coordinated communications and emergency response to the situation.

In early summer 2013-14, the heat alert system triggered for several low intensity heat events in the Central Midlands area of Tasmania, including the population centres of Ouse, Campbell Town and Ross. These events were monitored and actioned at a local level.

The week of 13-17 January 2014 saw a major heat event throughout Tasmania, with the response plan set into action.

The heat alert system initially triggered on Friday 10 January, pointing to some locally hot conditions for the Central Midlands, and a rising heat alert across the state for the next few days. At this point, the Director of Public Health emailed major health stakeholders to inform them of the potential event, and contacted local health facilities to raise awareness of the coming extreme temperatures.

Similar conditions continued over the next two days, and by Monday 13 January, the heat alert system indicated most of Tasmania was reaching extreme temperatures over the next three days (see map).

This prompted swift communications to emergency responders, GPs, hospitals and aged care facilities around the state. A media statement was also released and reported on through all major outlets. A series of tweets were sent from the @DHHSTas and @PopHealthTas accounts, which fed to the TasALERT website (www.alert.tas.gov.au). This actioned several local councils to spread the word through their own website and Twitter accounts.

On Tuesday 14 January forecast conditions had deteriorated slightly, with the vast majority of Tasmania forecast to experience extreme temperatures over the next three days. Communication was reinforced and the situation continued to be monitored, including an assessment of any health impacts (based on ambulance
case load and heat-related presentations at hospital emergency departments across the state).

At this point, there was clear evidence that the message was spreading quickly throughout the Tasmanian community. For example:

- workplaces with affiliated medical channels were alerting staff of upcoming extreme weather
- community radio stations were using social media to alert followers of the risk associated with heat; this was further shared widely across the community.

Communications activities continued for the remainder of the week (15-17 January).

A respite in heat wave conditions appeared on Wednesday 15 January and Thursday 16 January, with a forecast of extreme temperature for Friday 17 January. Extreme temperatures for Friday January 17 did not eventuate, and forecast conditions after 17 January showed temperatures dropping substantially, leading to a stand down in the alert.

Evaluation of ambulance data showed that case loads did not rise significantly during this period.

For more information on how to prepare for and cope with extreme heat, visit www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/peh/alerts/standing_health_alerts/extreme_heat