Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

Submission by Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC)

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Introduction

The Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper.

This submission should not be taken as the position of any single AFAC member. Some AFAC members will have contributed through jurisdictional submissions, and nothing in this submission should be taken as implying that our members do not fully support their jurisdictional submissions where made.

Numerous documents produced by AFAC have been cited below. These documents form the foundation of information used for this submission and are referenced in the text with hyperlinks where possible.

This submission begins with an overview of AFAC and its role within Australasian fire and emergency services, followed by AFAC's response to the Discussion Paper.

With connection and collaboration at our heart, AFAC has a proven track record of supporting national approaches. Fire and emergency services touch all parts of the community, in all parts of Australia and New Zealand. Their connection within the AFAC umbrella creates a unique opportunity for step changes in national approaches to disasters.

Overview of AFAC and its role

AFAC is the national council for fire, land management and emergency service authorities in Australia and New Zealand. AFAC represents 33 members and 25 affiliate members comprising permanent and part-time personnel and volunteers, totalling approximately 288,000 firefighters and emergency workers. AFAC's new Strategic Plan 2023-2027 was released in February of this year. The list of AFAC member organisations is provided here.

AFAC supports the sector to create safer, more resilient communities. We drive national consistency through collaboration, innovation and partnerships. We deliver enhanced capability by developing doctrine and supporting operations. AFAC has no direct role in the delivery of services to the community. AFAC also currently plays no role in representing its members in industrial matters.

Through our collaboration model, which encompasses 34 groups, technical groups and networks, AFAC assists the emergency management sector to identify and achieve strategic priorities. National collaboration is a cost-effective and structured way to share learnings and experience, and collectively contribute to the development of national positions, procedures and guidelines to support integrated emergency management. AFAC, with its collaboration groups, partnerships and initiatives such as the AFAC NRSC, AFAC NAFC, AFAC Centre of Excellence for Prescribed Burning and AIDR, are important national capabilities within Australia supporting fire and emergency services.

AFAC's most significant intellectual property asset is the suite of doctrine publications which articulates good practice based on the knowledge and experience of our members and informed by research where it is available. It is evidence-based, constantly reviewed and vested as the official view by the AFAC National Council and sector leaders.

AFAC representatives also lead the development of many Australian and International Standards Committees. AFAC and Standards Australia are signatories to a Memorandum of Understanding in the development and revision of standards relating to the management of fire related risks, fire protection and fire safety.

AFAC Strategic Directions 2022-2026

AFAC's work is guided by the Strategic Directions for fire and emergency services in Australia and New Zealand 2022-2026. The Strategic Directions provide the fire and emergency services sector with a shared vision and a joint commitment to enhanced community resilience. It informs, clarifies intent and identifies the actions required at a national level for fire and emergency services in Australia and New Zealand. AFAC recognises that a collaborative approach is critical to achieving the *Strategic Directions* and gives fire and emergency services a national voice and broader impact, while enhancing collective capabilities.

The Strategic Directions are:

1. Supporting resilient communities through risk reduction
2. Providing a trusted response
3. Using credible and timely information and data
4. Safe, capable and diverse workforce
5. Informed by knowledge, innovation and research
6. Effective and transparent governance.

Existing national capabilities

Several Royal Commissions and Inquires have called for "whole of nation effort", advocating for the Commonwealth Government to complement, enhance and support the role of states and territories, focussing on areas of national consistency, coordination and cooperation.

AFAC has taken an important role in supporting national capability and has facilitated several nationally significant initiatives that make Australians safer in the face of disasters. These include disaster risk reduction in the natural and built environment; public information and warnings; predictive services; national training and professionalisation; common doctrine, national aerial firefighting procurement and strategy, and national resource sharing.

AFAC operates several nationally significant initiatives that strengthen the ability of AFAC member agencies to support the safety and resilience of Australasian communities across the disaster management spectrum of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

The list below illustrates how AFAC manages initiatives through a productive model of national collaboration with emergency services agencies, stakeholders across the disaster resilience system and the Commonwealth government. These initiatives will benefit the resilience of Australian communities for generations to come and provide long-term capability whilst supporting preparedness, prevention and resilience efforts:

1. **AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC):** delivering coordination of interstate and international resource deployments. AFAC established the NRSC to develop and maintain the national Arrangement for Interstate Assistance (AIA); pursue collaboration opportunities with international jurisdictions; maintain the National Statement of Capability for Fire and Emergency Services and provide support, if requested, to jurisdictions involved in deployments. The NRSC is current co-funded by states and territories and NEMA.

   The success and strength of the AFAC NRSC, overseen by CCOSC, and the decisions it makes, relies on the relationships that exist and the commitment of State and Territory agencies to collectively assess their resource capability and requirements. This allows for a streamlined approach to resourcing as disasters escalate.

2. **AFAC National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC):** delivering national arrangements for the provision of aerial firefighting resources for combating bushfires. NAFC coordinates the leasing of a national fleet of specialised firefighting aircraft on behalf of State and Territory emergency services and facilitates the sharing of these aircraft between States and Territories during the fire season. The collaborative arrangements for the national aerial firefighting fleet have been instrumental in protecting communities and saving lives and property over past bushfire seasons.

3. **Australian Warning System (AWS):** The AWS is a new national approach to information and warnings during emergencies like bushfire, flood, storm, extreme heat and severe weather. The AWS uses a nationally consistent set of icons and calls to action. It has been designed based on feedback and research across Australia and aims to deliver a uniform approach to types of emergencies, no matter what your geographic location.

   Developed through a partnership between states and territories and the Commonwealth, the nationally consistent approach to warnings was made possible through AFAC's collaboration network. The Commonwealth coinvested in an education campaign to support its implementation.

4. **Australian Fire Danger Rating System (AFDRS):** The AFDRS was launched in 2022, marking a generational change to the way fire danger is calculated and communicated.

The AFDRS calculates, forecasts and reports fire danger using up-to-date fuel state data, spatial and satellite data, weather data, science and technology. It takes advantage of the many decades of research about how fire behaves, incorporating a wider range of fire behaviour models to better represent the variety of Australian vegetation and fuel types.

The AFDRS provides another example of Commonwealth and state relations where grant funds were supplied to NSW who subcontracted AFAC to support the program management and the national implementation. Governance arrangements ensured that all parties guided the decision-making process through the project. AFAC continues to support vital improvements to the system.

5. **A national bushfire simulator:** AFAC has supported a national approach to bushfire simulation. Originally supporting the operationalisation of Victorian technology across the country, AFAC has successfully delivered the next generation simulator using co-investment of states and territories and the philanthropic sector.

6. **Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR):** AIDR works to strengthen the resilience of Australian communities to disasters by building and sharing knowledge, developing capability, and supporting networks and communities-of-practice across the disaster risk reduction and resilience system.

   AFAC is the managing partner of AIDR, in consortium with the Australian Government National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the Australian Red Cross. AIDR delivers products and services well in excess of its contractual obligations with the Australian Government and has a far greater impact on the disaster resilience system than its $3m budget suggests. This is due in part to AIDR's linkages through AFAC and the important role emergency agencies play in the disaster management system.

   AFAC supports strengthening AIDR's capacity to deliver knowledge and capability across the disaster risk and resilience system rather than developing new entities with a similar role.

AFAC facilitates collaboration effectively and efficiently with a view to with a view to delivering national capability and coordination. This collaboration is a conduit to state and territory requirements.

AFAC was formed by the sector to streamline and amplify their work. The arrangements are grounded in legislated functions and allow for national solutions to be more easily integrated with on-the-ground requirements.

The arrangements are designed to work in a range of different scenarios. AFAC believe that the current arrangements are fit for purpose and will scale with time and clearly place the decision making and prioritisation of local resources in the hands of state and territory agencies. It also supports the development of local and international surge capability being targeted to the correct capabilities.

National investment in systems and training will support these arrangements. Like any system, optimising the use of existing resources.

Opportunities for reform

Climate and disaster resilience

Fire and emergency services are operating in an increasingly complex, uncertain and interconnected environment with climate change impacting the frequency, severity and complexity of extreme weather and cascading events. It is also changing the communities in which we operate in, and our ability to operate in compounding, complex and cascading environments. Our agencies and communities need to be better prepared than ever before and build adaptive capacity to address the immediate challenges and long-term impacts of emerging climate and disaster risks. Climate and disaster resilience requires:

1. Understanding of the complexity of potential climate and disaster risks and consequences, including an understanding of how those risks may change over time because of climate change and other factors;
2. Strategic commitment by all AFAC members and governments to integrate disaster risk reduction and resilience into planning and decision making;
3. Collective effort to reduce and manage disaster risk;
4. Innovation and continuous learning to build adaptive capacity; and
5. Managing transition risk and delivering actions that reduce emissions.

AFAC plays a central role in creating an environment where fire and emergency service agencies can come together to consider and implement climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. AFAC has a series of work programs currently supporting action to address climate and disaster risk, acknowledging that further actions must be taken to mitigate the impacts of disasters. This includes improved understanding of the far-reaching implications of climate change for emergency services, including but not limited to increasing resources for response, and strengthening the planning and policy frameworks for how and where we live and work.

Training and Interoperability

The increasing frequency and duration of disasters reinforces the criticality of interoperability and of building the next generation of volunteers to assist Australia to have the capacity and capability to respond to these challenges. Interoperability is essential when agencies and their workforces, paid and volunteer, are required to respond to such disasters within Australia and internationally.

Interoperability, however, is dependent on comprehensive and robust education and training systems and ongoing professional development to prepare our personnel to perform effectively and together in emergencies.

Through collaboration, sharing professional expertise and knowledge, AFAC members have improved their understanding of each other's systems of work and have come together to share their education and training expertise and resources.

AFAC supports initiatives that strengthen volunteers' capability to support communities during significant events, recognising that volunteers are not a homogeneous group and can organise in a myriad of ways.

AFAC views a core aspect of its business is for its members and its affiliates to undertake activities to prevent, prepare, respond to, and recover from incidents and emergencies and to work with and enable communities to be part of these activities.

In doing so, they train their workforce to ensure they can safely perform roles to save lives. Training, and ensuring their personnel can undertake work tasks safely, enables their core business. The industry leverages national competency standards to ensure individual agency standards are met and to promote interoperability within and across jurisdictions. The industry relies heavily on the ability to share resources, as well as to support international deployments. When fire and emergency services agencies deploy career and volunteer personnel interstate, all parties need to be confident that deployed personnel have the required skills, which are highly specific. Units of Competency and their Assessment Requirements provide the basis for this confidence and, consequently, interoperability.

Volunteer emergency service organisations have unique challenges in this respect because their volunteers have many other opportunities and demands competing for their time and attention. Skill sets can contribute to a volunteer's learning and career pathway outside of their volunteer work. This training can help to build community resilience, particularly for rural and remote communities that rely on volunteers to respond to emergencies in their area.

As the Commonwealth explores such models, the following could be considered to support the required capability and capacity development:

1. The Reimagining emergency management volunteering: more than just words project, which will provide tangible and actionable guidance for volunteer-involving organisations in the emergency management sector to make changes to improve the sustainability of emergency management volunteering into the future.
2. The Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS). AFAC, as the custodian of AIIMS doctrine, continues to build on and develop AIIMS as the industry need arises. Alongside this doctrine sits 2 state-accredited short courses – 22611VIC Course in Awareness of the AIIMS and 22612VIC Course in the AIIMS. Each of the functions within AIIMS is supported by national training standards.
3. The PUA Public Training Package, where interoperability for fire and emergency services is supported by qualifications and units of competency, in particular, access to individual units of competency which will assist in developing longer-term capacities and capabilities needed by the Commonwealth.
4. Ensuring that the skill sets required by trainers and assessors as outlined in the Standards for Registered Training Organisations, which are currently being revised, recognise the role of volunteers by including the TAESS00029 Volunteer Trainer Delivery Skill Set and the TAESS00030 Volunteer Trainer Delivery and Assessment Contribution Skill Set as legitimate requirements for volunteers.

Preparedness and response – Operational decision making

The Bureau of Meteorology has developed relationships with fire and emergency services to assist them in the delivery of services to support the safety and resilience of Australians.

A 2011 review led to the development of an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Provision of Bureau Hazard Services between states and territories and the Commonwealth. This agreement seeks to "formalise and standardise services provided to State and Territory Emergency Services Agencies, agree on clear allocation of responsibilities of the Australian Government, the States, Territories and local governments for Flood management, Fire Weather management and management of Extreme Weather and Hazard Impact Events. These agreements have led to a user-pays arrangement for services that exceed a defined level.

With a changing climate, technology and capability, accurate, timely and targeted services from the Bureau focussed on emergency management decisions will become vital to saving lives. The delivery of accurate and useful weather intelligence will become more and more important in coming decades and the Commonwealth are encouraged to examine current resourcing for the Bureau, and expand its core offering to emergency services. This alone would optimise resource allocation.

AFAC is not suggesting the Bureau are not already investing in the safety of Australians. We believe that the Commonwealth's investment should increase and that technology improvements alone cannot keep pace with emerging societal needs.

Without national investment, States and territories will find themselves having to invest more in this Commonwealth capability or seek services through private meteorological providers. Investing in the Bureau to meet growing needs would seem fundamental and generate a profound impact on the lives and livelihoods of Australians.

Examples of unmet national demand include support for aerial firefighting, local intelligence to support decisions, ongoing development of systems to support prediction systems such as AFDRS, currently funded by states and territories, flash flood warning systems for the highest risk areas, inundation forecasting for floods, storm surge and tsunami, the installation of a truly national flood warning network and improvements in radar decision support capability.

These are a small subset of initiatives that could be argued as lifesaving national capability that may not happen without significant national investment.

Resource sharing

As mentioned earlier, at the heart of Australia's approach to disaster response is the sharing of suitably qualified resources. Interstate resource sharing does not occur without the confidence of state and territory fire and emergency Commissioners and Chiefs. They are responsible for the resources available to share and are reliant on the ongoing commitment, competence, and capability for the resource sharing entity.

Further investment in the systems to support this resource sharing locally and overseas would improve the resilience of our disaster response. The Commonwealth co-invest in a standing capability, but work is needed to ensure this is fit for purpose.

Aerial firefighting and other aviation matters

Aerial firefighting costs have increased greatly through a range of factors including lengthening seasons, new fire regimes, freight challenges and global conflict. The capability of fire and emergency aviation is optimised through resource sharing, cooperation, collaboration and communication with the Australian, state and territory governments, international bodies and industry partners. AFAC's role in national aerial firefighting procurement and coordination is key.

These arrangements should be viewed as an embedded part of national disaster management capability and should continue to be funded adequately to keep pace with innovation and public expectations of aerial firefighting.

Most firefighting aircraft are leased from appropriately experienced and qualified Australian commercial aircraft providers, however, by sharing some aircraft costs with countries in the northern hemisphere, Australia can utilise a fleet size larger than would otherwise be possible.

With changing fire seasons globally and demand for the larger resources growing, this previously successful strategy will be challenged in future years. NAFC will continue to work with the federal government to explore opportunities to guarantee the availability of these aviation assets, which could include more sovereign capability. The increase in demand for these larger aviation assets have also resulted in a significant increase in costs that is seeing an increase in the relative proportions met by states and territories.

The role of aviation in transporting large aircraft is currently filled by Defence on many occasions. Further investment in these assets will support rapid sharing in the future.

The use of aircraft in multiple hazards is also front of mind for the sector including intelligence-gathering, transport and rescue operations and working towards new, flexible modes of operation.

Summary

AFAC plays a central role in bringing fire and emergency service agencies together to address initiatives specific to disaster risk reduction, resilient communities, and national capability. We are a trusted delivery partner.

AFAC members recognise that we must be part of a whole of government and community effort to transition and adapt to a broad range of issues including climate change and other national disasters. AFAC is uniquely placed to lead further national initiatives, working in partnership with the Commonwealth, state and territory governments. AFAC has a proven record in effectively delivering national projects, collaboration and consistency and leaves no risk for duplication of effort.

AFAC was formed by state and territory agencies to act as a vehicle to enable national approaches and to amplify the collective capability across the country. AFAC's advantage is its ability to facilitate a national perspective and understanding. We connect, not control.

AFAC welcomes the opportunity for further discussion on AFAC's continued role in delivering national outcomes and working in partnership with the Commonwealth to ensure safer and more resilient communities.