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Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Who is the Community and Public Sector Union?

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is a national union with over 120,000 members, with Emergency Management at the heart of its membership, located in all states and territories. The CPSU covers workers employed by Commonwealth and State Governments. Amongst the essential workers that are within the CPSU's coverage include, emergency hotlines such as "000", emergency coordination agencies, staff who work for combat agencies including non-sworn police, employees of our State Emergency Services, employees of our Regional and Country Fire Services, National Parks Fire Fighters, State Forestry Organisations, Government Communications, Roads and Marine Safety, as well as non fire-fighters in structural fire-fighting agencies. Additionally workers from agencies such as the State Government Service Agencies ie Service NSW etc, Housing, and Community Services, are critically involved in Evacuation and Recovery Exercises.

We welcome this review into the alternatives to the deployment of Defence Forces for Natural Disasters whilst recognizing their role as a last resort.

1 What factors should the Commonwealth consider in the development of alternative national capabilities for emergency response?

1.1 Over-Reliance on Volunteers- The model of relying on volunteers has shown to be increasing the risks for our communities. Northern Rivers Floods (NSW) and the Black Summer demonstrated that whilst there are large numbers of volunteers, for the length of the disasters, and the size of the disasters that we now experience, aren't adequate to prepare for and mitigate the natural disasters we have, with only a few thousand paid and volunteer firefighters available to combat hundreds of fires on some of the worst days during the black summer. These volunteers are also of an ageing cohort, and simply do not have enough of the essential qualifications in place in particular areas in order to effectively staff a combat agency in all operations. Financially, many volunteers cannot give up their income in order to fight fires or support people in floods and storms. There is also an additional problem in that many volunteer agencies in declared emergencies insist on a volunteer command structure that sees relatively inexperienced volunteers, being advised on how to deploy personnel and manage emergencies, by multiple experienced officers, thus duplicating command structures and reducing operability on the ground.

Alternate Models to Volunteers

1.1a) Permanent Versatile Workforce

Despite its claim of having tens of thousands of volunteers, NSW Rural Fire Service has a labour force model for outside of emergencies, focussed on mitigation that is effective, but is inadequately staffed with only a few hundred employees. It has the State Mitigation Service workforce that mechanically and by conventional mechanisms fixes fire trails, create natural fire breaks, reduces risk at high risk locations, and even assists elderly maintain their residence in bush fire prone areas. There are several hundred of these workers employed by the state. These workers can assist with hazard reduction, when volunteers can't assist, as State Mitigation are employed by the Government and rostered appropriately. With Commonwealth support, these workers could be extended in their scope and numbers to extend their work and work in areas that also assist the State Emergency Services with mitigation activities to combat storms and floods.

Another model is that of the retained firefighter model that exists in several states whereby firefighters maintain their day jobs but leave to fight fires. The problem with this model is that it is focussed on putting the fire out and not risk mitigation.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth Government look to review the NSW RFS State Mitigation Model and provide funding to the states to create/expand their state mitigation services.

1.1 b) First Nations Stewardship and Delivery

Land Management has been undertaken for tens of thousands of years across our nation by the first people. Cold burning, flood mitigation, and other environmental practices have been part of the culture of first nations people. In several states partnerships have been made with First Nations people to co-manage areas through Aboriginal Ranger programs, to involve First Nations in fire risk mitigation, and also emergency management. These activities also build on the cultural knowledge of local First Nations communities and allows for the skills and knowledge to be passed down between the generations. Aboriginal Ranger programs provide direct employment with state government and also empower workers to gain skills through VET programs which can be developed to improve income and also transferability of skills.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth support state agencies hire more Aboriginal Rangers.

1.2 National Aerial Fleet- A Dedicated National Aerial Fleet can only be effectively acquired and coordinated at a national level. Current arrangements that require leasing of foreign equipment and personnel, is not working as emergency seasons increasingly overlap between Southern and Northern hemispheres. Arrangement currently exist between states for sharing of these resources, with some states now acquiring their own vehicles, however, arrangements appear to be based on dialogue between the states, and not based on priority. A versatile regional fleet that can also be utilized to assist our Indo-Pacific neighbours in the region when emergencies strike them will enable more reliability for us and provide critical support to our partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth Government look to expand and coordinate our National Aerial Fleet.

1.3 Air traffic control- When utilizing aerial vehicles at an emergency, there can be numerous vehicles in the same airspace, hostile environmental conditions and also conflicting safety scope and perspectives between ground crew at the incident and the flight base. There are also

variations in the authority dependent on where the aerial vehicles are operated and under what form of emergency. This works to a degree by aerial vehicles operating at different altitudes for different functions.

Whether it is agricultural emergencies such as plague locusts, fires, or floods, we have had too many casualties from aerial crashes. Often the aerial vehicles at the incident are controlled by local authorities and larger vehicles such as air bombers are controlled by metropolitan or state controllers. Having adequate air traffic control "in the field" may enable better communications with aerial vehicles and enable control of what is a dynamic flight paths in difficult environments. See for example January 23, 2020 double fatality and ATSB Report ^{1, 2}.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth look to train local emergency services to have air traffic control skills for emergency management or deployment to emergencies, or deployment of professional air traffic control.

1.4 Better Interstate and International Agreements

Commonwealth could assist with better international and interstate agreements, standards, doctrine and interoperability for moving resourcing in and out of the country to assist with Emergency Management response. Much of this work for fire emergencies is done at the state level.

This could include:

- national standards for radio networks (as per USA)
- national doctrine for wildfire/flood etc. response
- national standards for equipment, training and PPE/C
- commonwealth coordination personnel embedded with state agencies and vice versa (permanent liaison type roles)

There is a potential for some kind of joint venture partnership model between northern and southern hemisphere agencies where you could have fire fighters moving with the fire seasons.

Recommendation: Commonwealth assist with International and Interstate agreements on interoperability and also exchange of resources.

1.5 Benchmarking equipment age and capabilities and setting minimum standards

Increasingly equipment is becoming more advanced and able to protect the lives of our emergency service workers. However, what is provided in the field may not be adequate for the modern emergency. A number of the fatalities for fire-fighters in the black summer may have been saved with the right safety equipment. Additionally, limited state resources means that states often cherry pick where new equipment is assigned based on political reasons, rather than where the

¹ATSB Report, Collision with terrain involving Lockheed EC130Q, N134CG, 50 km north-east of Cooma-Snowy Mountains Airport (near Peak View), New South Wales, on 23 January 2020, https://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/investigation_reports/2020/aair/ao-2020-007

² ABC News, Investigation finds NSW Rural Fire Service failed to fully communicate dangers before Large Air Tanker crashed near Cooma in January 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-29/multiple-factors-behind-air-tanker-2020-crash-that-killed-three/101381486>

equipment is needed for the risk, region or environmental emergency. A constant improvement in standards will be required in order to maintain operational function, reliability and improved safety.

Recommendation: Commonwealth undertakes research to assist benchmarking equipment age and capabilities and setting minimum standards

1.6 Support for new appliance and equipment, and retro-fitting relatively young appliances

A number of appliances used by emergency services have become aged. As they have become aged, newer safety measures become unable to be retro-fitted to the aged vehicles. There are a number of workers who for instance work in fire who work in vehicles that are older than they are. These vehicles don't have burn-over protection, or roll over protection, and importantly reduced reliability, placing the workers in them at risk. Some agencies aren't prepared to provide improved safety measures for some when they can't provide these measures for all areas.

Recommendation: Commonwealth help fund retro-fitting of appliances and support supply of new appliance and equipment.

1.7 Communications

1.7 a) Cross Border Internet and Fire Tracking Support- Every State has their own public hazards/fires near me or other tracking software for internal incidents in their state. There needs to be a national system to allow particularly for public in border areas to prepare for impending natural disasters. The Commonwealth with constitutional power has the capacity to unify these as they are communications. Rather than create a new white elephant covid app, the CPSU recommends the Commonwealth and States should find which systems work well and just have Commonwealth buy out the contracts of the old systems and enable states to run the unified system.

1.7 b) Telecommunications- Telecommunications powers are constitutionally a Commonwealth matter. Emergency Communications have tended to be run state by state in conjunction with telecommunication providers. There needs to be more reliability, more carriers, more frequencies, and coverage especially in a natural disaster. The Commonwealth can have a role in ensuring better reliability and coverage for emergency communications that all emergency workers rely upon. Currently Government Communications networks in the states are congested, have questionable reliability and coverage and inter-operability. The Commonwealth Government can play a role in creating a reliable system.

1.7 c) Emergency tracking technology- there is a level of inconsistency on vehicle and personal tracking technology that allows base to monitor with location of emergency personnel. During the black summer, it was evident that a number of agencies did not have adequate tracking or communication, and many vehicles were lost behind the fire lines for long periods. These communications technologies also may assist remote area fire-fighting.

1.7 d) Inconsistent Communication Protocols – Communications between agencies within states and between state agencies appear to be inconsistent across our federation. There needs to be more consistency developed into the communications systems of our emergency services.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth use its Communications powers to:

- a) **To identify the best Incident Near Me App, and then contribute for the host state to allow the app to be adjusted to include all states.**
- b) **Establish a national network for emergency services in emergencies, with adequate bandwidth, coverage and reliability.**
- c) **Bring all states up to the same level with emergency vehicle and personnel tracking systems**
- d) **Consistency between communication between agencies needs to be improved.**

2. What are some of the barriers to increasing national-level capabilities?

2.1 Funding

Funding for state government budgets has been declining over the last three decades as a percentage of the economy. This has seen the relative size of the emergency management and land management budget decline, despite greater areas of land management under National Parks, Crown Lands and State Forests, and an ever increasing area of residential encroachment adjacent to our natural environment increasing the risk. The Commonwealth has a role to play in financing risk mitigation and disasters management.

As the tax base has shifted to the Commonwealth, states have had to utilize different methods to maintain their emergency management personnel. The states have a variety of funding models from local government contributions, fire levies with insurance, car park fees, general emergency levies, direct budget funding, state-based insurance schemes for hazard reduction work, and wild fire and other emergencies (such as the NSW Treasury Managed Fund) and also charity funding. Creating a Finance Model at the Commonwealth level that complements and fills the gap on emergency management, risk mitigation with the states will make a significant difference for emergency management in the states.

Similarly National Parks have a large percentage of our land under management but only receive a small amount of funding with which to undertake land management and hazard reduction. Many National Parks agencies have taken on more land under management, over the past decades, but not seen an increase and in some states seen a decrease in trained fire fighters under state "efficiency dividends" and ideological attacks by Liberal National Party governments on National Parks. Due to the size of the land under management and the proximity of much of it to private neighbours, the Commonwealth could assist through funding mechanisms to permanently assist National Parks maintain suitable numbers of state emergency and fire-fighting staff.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth look at permanently establishing a finance model that enables states to properly resource their land and emergency management agencies to adequately minimize risk, and manage emergencies.

2.2 Lack of inter-operability between state agencies

There are a range of different procedures and protocols between state agencies and between states.

Within states there is inconsistency between agencies, such as different radio call signs between agencies at the same emergency, technologies, radio channels and procedures, tracking technology and vehicles. These differences increase when the jurisdictional differences are added

at major incidents. This may be because of different operating conditions, or previous incidents, but is often because of the historical nature of the agencies that use these different processes. If the organisations and states are to work better with each other in the expected larger emergencies, then these differences need to be improved.

This needs to be coordinated from a national perspective and to employ evidence based best practice.

Recommendation: That the Commonwealth coordinate between the states and territories a harmonization of protocols and procedures for the same or similar incidents and processes.

3. How could unions contribute to uplifting volunteer welfare capabilities to meet a potential increase in emergency management volunteerism?

The CPSU position is that volunteers can increase vulnerability during an emergency as volunteers can be selective in what work they do, not doing work they don't want to or aren't able to do, volunteers can be unqualified for critical safety work if they have not updated their qualifications and competencies, may not be work fit, and may have conflicting demand for their times such as personal or work/business demands.

In a number of the natural disasters the CPSU has witnessed in the last few years, we have observed that our paid members in the public service make up the majority of the paid staff and volunteers at evacuation centres and often in different combat volunteer groups.

These workers have suitable workplace conditions and flexibility in order to volunteer their time, or interchangeably with paid work at emergencies. Most also are able to get paid emergency leave in order to assist the community and often suitable recovery leave.

3.1 FACS- Disaster Welfare Mental Health Funding

The CPSU has found that mental health of our emergency services workers is often treated as a secondary response by our combat agencies, and often only initiated after significant pressure. However, in a number of states the initial disaster refuge and recovery is coordinated by state government social services agencies such as child protection and housing.

These staff are generally trained in administration, psychology and social work. At an evacuation centre, these staff are extremely busy working long days assisting the community access the essentials, but also getting back on their feet with emergency housing, accessing health and personal possessions and comforting conversations with the public and emergency services staff. These workers are grossly under-resourced, however, if they were able to receive additional funding for staff, they could also assist reduce the burnout of emergency services, by speaking to and undertaking a quick mental health assessment to manage not only fatigue, but the early signs of trauma based mental health deterioration.

There would need to be additional funds to pay for the additional work force required to undertake this work, but the benefit would be early diagnosis and assistance to mitigate the mental health burden for years to come.

A National Helpline could be established for initial referral and ongoing confidential management of emergency service worker's mental health after a referral from the on the ground Disaster Welfare officer.

Additional funding for targeted mental health support for our emergency service workers should be provided, as Medicare is not adequate for some of the workers affected by trauma.

Recommendations:

- a) ***That Commonwealth funding for Disaster Welfare is provided to allow additional Disaster Welfare workers to assess and triage emergency management workers for mental health symptoms.***
- b) ***That the Commonwealth work with the states and territories to develop a National Emergency Worker Mental Health Helpline to assist all emergency service workers manage their mental health during a crisis.***
- c) ***That additional funding to that available in Medicare is provided to ensure that a targeted program can assist emergency services workers mental health.***

4. What are the primary concerns for workers involved in crisis response? If they are employed directly? If they are volunteering their time away from their ordinary employment?-

There are a number of concerns for workers involved in a crisis response, which in no particular order include:

- Lack of support from the hierarchy for decisions made.
- Being undermined by volunteers
- Safety issues and lack of knowledge by control agency
- Conflict between agencies about who is in control which filters to the ground
- Lack of resources and technology
- Inadequate resources and facilities to accommodate workers including base camps
- Old or lacking equipment
- Lack of interoperability
- Feelings that some agencies are more concerned with "building empires" rather than doing the job at hand.
- Potential loss of income from the deployment and if injury occurs
- Risk of becoming mentally damaged
- Fatigue

The CPSU has a number of workers who work primarily in a combat agency and then volunteer for their local emergency service agency out of hours, so these themes are common for both direct employed and volunteer workers.

5. What incentives should we consider to increase emergency management volunteerism?

As noted above there are problems with the current volunteer model. There is considerable conflict between agencies based on the number of volunteers they possess, which is often used as political leverage, to become the controller of different types of emergencies and access to funding of resources. This translates to conflict on the incident grounds.

However, a considerable percentage of the active emergency management volunteers are public servants. CPSU members are in every town where there is a school or another government service. Incentives for these workers to volunteer more through skills-based allowances, and funds to replace the worker whilst deployed, in addition to special leave that many receive will make it

easier for the workers and their agencies to volunteer. Allowances similar to first aid allowances could be provided to these workers who take on extra emergency management qualifications.

This could be funded through the Commonwealth as part of its contributions to the local communities.

Workplace conditions such as paid forced post incident leave days to recuperate, replacement employee funding as well as emergency management leave could assist employees to become and remain an emergency service volunteer.

Workplace amenities and hygiene are another essential area that often is lacking. For example in recent floods base camps were surrounded by smelly, bloated and decaying farm animals, ongoing generators, leaving volunteers and staff with poor hygiene and built up fatigue. An alternative agency housed their paid responders in available motels in a nearby town. Same job task, but different treatment. Volunteers were treated poorly.

Traumatic Stress Disorders and other mental health conditions could be assisted with additional early assessment and ongoing support as noted above.

This model of increasing the skills of public servants, has some similarities with the USA model where the Federal US Forest Service has a huge emergency responder work force available for deployment at the local level. They also drive the inter-operability and doctrine standards which makes interstate deployments so seamless. We could learn a lot from the US Forest Service, with research to develop this proposal.

Recommendation: Commonwealth looks to improve the emergency management skills of the Commonwealth and State public servants by improving workplace conditions, and increasing allowances and support for these workers.

6. What roles could unions play in a national crisis response? What role could unions play to galvanise workers to undertake emergency management volunteer work?

The Unions have demonstrated considerable experiences to deliver in major events. Examples include the Sydney Olympics and other major events where unions have worked with government to enable a diverse workforce to deliver a reliable workforce, many functions, co-ordinate volunteers and deliver great events.

The Unions have the capacity to deliver a workforce of paid trained employees, and also if the conditions are right to have workers volunteer from the Commonwealth or State Public Sectors.

Consultation before the disaster to plan for these needs is the essential element.

The Unions have also been involved in ensuring ongoing management of crisis and incidents. For example during COVID-19 pandemic, unions called for and joined key Crisis management teams to ensure adequate staffing, appropriate safety, and ongoing service delivery for essential services , such as health care, corrective services, disabilities, often without the support of government.

7. What role could unions play to train, on-board, or coordinate volunteers before and during crises?

Emergency Services unions including the CPSU, Police Federation, UFU, FBEU, and local government union ASU are already participating as members of the new Public Skills Australia Jobs and Skills

Council which manages the bulk of the training packages that are used under the emergency management framework.

At the JSC we are aware of shortages in the Industry and are working with agencies to identify how much, as part of the workforce planning process.

If Commonwealth can support volunteering through payment of allowances there are over 1 million public servants available to be trained, coordinate emergency service workers and volunteers.

Recommendation:

- a) *Utilise the new Public Skills Australia Jobs Skills Council to support the mass training, on-boarding of workers and volunteers.***
- b) *Support Public Servants working for the emergency services by creating allowances for acquiring certain emergency management skills.***

END