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Submission via portal

Department of Home Affairs
National Emergency Management Agency

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response, Discussion Paper August 2023.

This submission is informed particularly by our experience of the 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires and in particular the assistance provided by the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Irrespective of the outcome of the review, I would like to reiterate the importance of the support provided by the ADF and how much it was appreciated not only by East Council Shire Council, but also by the community of East Gippsland as a whole.

Critical aspects of the support provided by the ADF during the 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires, as experienced in East Gippsland included:

- *Unique Equipment and Logistics Capabilities*

The ADF is able to deploy significant equipment and logistics capabilities to support disaster relief. During the 2019-20 fires the most high-profile example was the HMAS Choules which provided a critical role in the support and evacuation of Mallacoota. However, there were also a range of fixed wing aircraft, helicopters (Black Hawk and Chinook) and heavy vehicles used to access isolated areas and provide personnel and relief supplies.

The ADF also supported with airport operations in Bairnsdale and similar logistics support.

- *Planning*

ADF personnel were integrated into Incident Control Centres and played an important role in planning for relief and early recovery activities (such as road clearing).

- *An independent, committed workforce with the skills and ability to manage arduous work and community members during times of extreme stress*

Following a disaster there is a range of clean-up and other work (such as road clearing to provide vital access to isolated communities) which is arduous and often beyond the capacity of the communities impacted and existing workforces. The ADF provided a workforce to support this that was not only capable of such arduous work in hot and smoky conditions, it was also independent and required limited support from impacted communities.

It was also available to deploy at relatively short notice. The ADF had the necessary plant and infrastructure (such as temporary bridges) to fast-track important access.

- *Encouragement and support*

There are numerous stories from the 2019-20 fires of the encouragement, support and confidence provided to local communities by the arrival of the ADF (and in some cases overseas defence personnel).

In considering the future of Commonwealth support for disaster response, these features of the ADF response should be taken into account.

In the event that the equipment and logistics capabilities of the ADF are not available in the future, then other Commonwealth and State agencies will need to retain equivalent capabilities for relief and early recovery in the event that they are required for a major (nationally significant) event (e.g. additional vessels, helicopters, a trained and equipped arduous workforce that can be called upon). Currently most of the investment of this kind by other agencies is focused on initially combatting the emergency (e.g. aerial firefighting resources) rather than relief and early recovery. In a major, long duration event, both are required simultaneously.

We are therefore of the view that the ADF should continue to be made available for major, nationally significant emergency events and should be further skilled and resources to undertake this important work.

It would be an inefficient use of public funds to provide comparable resources and capabilities, independent of the ADF. If recent events have raised concern about the capacity of the ADF to fulfil both defence and major disaster response tasks, then it would appear to be most cost effective to augment the capacity of the ADF. Again, this is on the basis that the ADF would only be called on in the most extreme events where the limits of other local, state and Commonwealth resources are reached.

The impacts of climate change are likely to result in more frequent fire seasons like 2019-20 and in particular, impacts which are widespread and fires that run for several months. Similarly, we are also likely to experience frequent and significant storm and flood events across the nation. Volunteers will continue to provide a significant role in this context. However, the scale and duration of events means that it will also be important to have access to a paid workforce (like the ADF including the Army reserve) that can deploy for extended periods of time and support relief and immediate recovery works (e.g. restoring access).

I note that the review indicates that that the ADF should not have a role in disaster response except in the most extreme cases. In the context of more frequent, larger and more widespread events it will be important to have a shared understanding of what is meant by “except in the most extreme cases”.

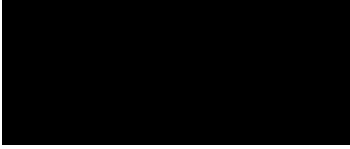
To the extent that the ADF continue to have an active role in responding to major disaster events, it is also important that ADF members receive appropriate training and procedures are developed to support such operations e.g. training that enables operations to occur within areas where the is fire risk.

The Commonwealth Government has reinvigorated work on disaster risk reduction and building community resilience through the Disaster Ready Fund. Continued leadership and greater funding support will be critical in reducing the impacts of disasters. I note that investment of physical infrastructure is often the focus of such programs (and continues to be important). However, so too is investment in social infrastructure. While such investment will reduce the impact of disasters, there will continue to need to be Commonwealth capacity to support major disaster response.

Council has welcomed the support of the Commonwealth through the Disaster Ready Fund and the extensive support of the ADF and other Commonwealth agencies during and following the 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires.



Yours faithfully



ANTHONY BASFORD
Chief Executive Officer