

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper form

1 Introduction

This web form is to make a written submission to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper (/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/alternative-commonwealth-capabilitiesfor-crisis-response-discussion-paper). Submissions to the discussion paper close at 11:59pm Wednesday 20 September 2023.

To help us address the challenge outlined in this discussion paper, you may wish to consider the below questions:

- Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?
- At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?
- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
- What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?
 - What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?
 - How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way?
 - How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?
 - How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?
 - What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?
 - What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?
- Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?
- What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?
- What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?

2 Crisis investigation area too narrow focussed

Relates to these questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper. I believe that the Commonwealth has got this matter/ area totally wrong. It should be the following assessment:

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Disaster Mitigation and Crisis Response Discussion Paper.

It is totally unclear to me why the Commonwealth is so focussed on crisis management, not mitigation management to reduce the extent, severity and impacts of bushfires and floods and associated crises.

Putting extra resources and funding into bushfire, flood and storm management is the right approach, reducing the need for crises resources.

3 Importance of adequate investment in disaster resilience and safer communities to reduce crises, costs and resources

Relates to these questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

The Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities report “We cannot prevent weather events, but that does not make disasters inevitable” (November 2017) considered the total economic cost of natural disasters in each state and territory, finding that the forecast cost of natural disasters will reach \$39 billion annually by 2050 noted the following:

“This report considers challenges for disaster resilience in the states and territories, and the role of each government in collaboration with other jurisdictions, community and business.

The report:

Confirms that further investment in disaster resilience – in both physical and community preparedness – is essential to lessen the forecast increase in costs.

Finds that investment in disaster resilience yields a double dividend. First, in the avoided impacts of disasters when they occur. And second, in the broader co-benefits that arise even in the absence of a disaster.

Shows that state and territory governments have several levels to directly build resilience.”

Deloitte Access Economics report “Economic reality check Adapting Australia for climate-resilient growth” from January 2022 notes:

“Australia’s disaster relief strategies are underpinned by a cycle of underinvestment in resilience and adaptation. It’s been estimated by the Productivity Commission that 97 per cent of all-natural disaster funding in Australia is spent after an event, with just 3 per cent invested prior to an event to reduce the impact of future disasters.”

The investment of just 3 per cent of all-natural disaster funding in Australia prior to disaster events to reduce the impact of future disasters is staggering. And considering that investment in disaster resilience yields a double dividend, avoided impacts of disasters when they occur and also the broader co-benefits that arise even in the absence of a disaster, major and increased investment in flood mitigation is essential.

There is further disaster funding detail in the Menzies Research Centre Policy Paper (2020), Strengthening Resilience: Managing natural disasters after the 2019-20 bushfire season:

“Despite this relentless commitment to inquiries, in 2014, a report released by the Productivity Commission into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements found that government natural disaster funding arrangements had been inefficient, inequitable and unsustainable. ‘They are prone to cost shifting, ad hoc responses and short-term political opportunism.’ The Productivity Commission lamented that the funding mix was disproportionately recovery-based and did not promote mitigation. It observed that the political incentives for mitigation were weak, ‘since mitigation provides public benefits that accrue over a long-time horizon,’ and that over time this would create entitlement dependency and undermines individual responsibility for natural disaster risk management.’ At that time, it said, mitigation funding amounted to only three per cent of what is spent on post-disaster recovery and recommended that the Australian Government should gradually increase the amount of annual mitigation funding it provides to state and territory governments to \$200 million.”

The paper pointed out that, in Australia, “one dollar spent on mitigation can save at least two dollars in recovery costs. Committing additional mitigation funding makes economic sense”.

The importance of adequate investment in fire and flood risk reduction and mitigation is critical, as well as reducing the extent and number of crises.

4 Fire/ bushfire risk, mitigation and reducing crisis resources needs

Relates to these questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

A bit of explanation on why we continue to get all these bushfire crises.

There have been a very large number of bushfires in Australia's history. In relation to the disastrous 2019/20 bushfire season, as noted in the paper Filkov et al. (2020):

... A total of 18,983,588 hectares were burned, 3,113 houses and 33 lives lost in 15,344 bushfires in Black Summer fires; and

Damage from the bushfires is estimated to have had a \$20 billion impact to the economy, greatly exceeding the record A\$4.4 billion set by 2009 Black Saturday fires.

Most of these bushfire areas were located in south eastern Australia.

There are many important risk and mitigation issues in relation to fire and bushfire management in south eastern Australia:

- There is a poor consideration of the fuel load issue across forests and actual forest fuel loads in forests, at very high levels, strata and heights and increasing. There is inadequate action addressing the fuel load issue and reducing community, infrastructure and fauna impacts from bushfires.
- There is totally inadequate funding, focus and commitment for reducing fuel loads, undertaking prescribed burning, forest thinning and community protection. There is inadequate state funding for prescribed burning and minor federal funding to increase prescribed burning, noting areas of prescribed burning are very small and decreasing and communities are at risk.
- There have been losses of bushfire skills over the last 30 years. This applies with bushfire control, backburning, prescribed burning and in some cases the use of aircraft in prescribed burning.
- Many communities have limited fire mitigation with inadequate bushfire protection.
- There is little active community involvement in fire management across Australia, only in a small number of cases. The bushfire impacts on towns and cities across Australia has been large over long period. Major investment in avenues such as the fire adapted communities, firewise, local fire safe councils is important to increase community safety.
- In a number of local government areas there has been limited funding and, in some cases, will to resolve fire issues and mitigation.
- Risks at each location vary and solutions will vary depending on extent of the bushfire problem, extent of impacts, funding, extent of mitigation opportunities and community input to solutions.
- Improved bushfire protection opportunities and approaches to protect communities need to be tabled for each town and city and discussed with each community and then at state and federal levels.
- Focus on low intensity burning for protection of towns and cities at the expense of landscapes is increasing the bushfire problem with long run fires across landscapes.
- Bushfire insurance costs are going up.
- Infrastructure protection from bushfires is a sleeping disaster area.
- There is limited funding and actioning for improving resilience in Australia's forests and protecting communities. There is generally very poor actioning in regards to forest health and the decline of forest health across Australia's forests, mild fire is an important component of improving forest health and setting up healthy and landscapes.

There are many barriers and restrictions to the use of low intensity prescribed and ecological maintenance burning in south eastern Australia, further increasing bushfire risks to communities and the same ecosystems where low intensity fire is restricted. Barriers occur within the following category areas, including funding: community and infrastructure; risk management; expertise; advice source; bureaucracy and leadership and on the ground barrier issues in need of resolution. It is important to consider barriers in optimising low intensity burning programs in south eastern Australia in order to optimise fire management.

One state leads the way in regards to undertaking low intensity burning of forested areas. As outlined in The Truth About Fuel Reduction Burning on the Bush Fire Front website, the graph below is the result, not of junk science modelling, but of real data gathered from almost 60 years of historical data from the forests of south west WA. These data unequivocally show that when the area of prescribed burning trends down, the area of uncontrolled bushfires (wildfires) trends up. There is a simple explanation: bushfires are more difficult to put out in long unburnt, heavy fuels. The area annually burnt by bushfire escalates exponentially when the area of prescribed burning in a region falls below 8 percent per annum. Burning about 8% per annum results in about 40 % of bushland carrying fuels 0 to 5 years old.

In conclusion, it is essential that we allocate greater funding to bushfire mitigation to reduce the extent of bushfire risks and crises, and consequent need for disaster resources. This includes prescribed burning and forest thinning, as widely used in the US. The Disaster Ready Fund (DRF) of \$1 billion dollars over the next five years to improve Australia's resilience and reduce the risk of natural disasters is not adequate to address this massive fuel load issue.

In addition, expanding the prescribed burning program to 8 % of forests per year provide a great training and expertise program that can be used in major bushfire crises where they occur.

The loss of native timber harvesting machinery with harvesting stoppages is going to make future bushfire crises worse, especially with the large fuel loads.

There are many skilled/ partially skilled fire fighters outside of the state fire fighter systems. These include farmers, foresters and others who have an interest in protecting communities. I was one of many such people that fought the 2019/ 20 bushfires, in S NSW. These people are important in crisis management, indeed critical, yet they have no insurance protection for themselves nor their vehicles in relation to fighting bushfires. This is another issue that needs to be looked at, to increase bushfire fighting resources.

I don't believe empires and huge plane fleet thinking should be adopted in refining crisis management, not buying or leasing expensive machinery.

5 Flood risk, mitigation and reducing crisis resource needs

Relates to these questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

Many communities have limited flood mitigation with inadequate protection.

Other communities have sound flood mitigation, however it is at its maximum limit.

In many cases there has been limited funding and in some cases will to resolve flooding issues and flood mitigation. Preparation of shovel ready projects is an issue that needs massive community and government input across states.

Costs of flooding is huge and increasing.

Flood insurance costs are going up.

The Insurance Council of Australia is calling on state and federal governments to commit to spending \$2 billion over the next five years on infrastructure to make communities more resilient to floods.

Risks at each location vary and solutions will vary depending on extent of the flood problem, extent of impacts, funding, extent of mitigation opportunities and community input to solutions.

Options to protect communities need to be tabled for each town and city and discussed with each community and then at state and federal levels.

As a society we need to be careful where mitigation of flood risks occurs at one location and then downstream increased development of floodplains doesn't increase overall flood risks further.

Disaster flooding areas like Lismore, Ballina and many other communities in south eastern Australia need updated mitigation measures and recovery funding urgently, with a massive focus on design and build of flood mitigation measures to minimise risk of future flooding in those areas. Shovel ready projects need to be progressed urgently. Where there are potential options available, the social and environmental costs of ongoing repeat flooding is not an acceptable option and agreed solutions need to be actioned.

Grafton and South Grafton is an example of an extensive flood levee, gate and pump system, it has been successful over time. However, noting the number of close shaves in regards to flooding, further adaptive management is urgently needed for Grafton, South Grafton and other nearby towns to reduce flood risk further, developing shovel ready projects urgently for funding. There are many locations such as this.

There were many citizen rescues undertaken at Lismore. These people are important in crisis management, indeed critical, yet they have no insurance protection for themselves nor their equipment/ vehicles in relation to flood rescue. This is another issue that needs to be looked at in crisis management.

6 Crisis management opportunities

Relates to these questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
- What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?
- What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?

There are a number of opportunity areas:

6.1 Defence forces and resources for crises

The “Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper – August 2023” notes:

In response to the Defence Strategic Review, released on 24 April 2023, the Government agreed in-principle to work with the states and territories to develop national resilience and response measures for adverse climate change at the local level without the need of ADF support, except in the most extreme emergencies. The Government also agreed in-principle that Defence should be the force of last resort for domestic aid to the civil community.

I disagree with this finding:

- Experience gained by the Defence Force in flood, bushfire and other disasters is a critical component of defence force training.
- Experience gained in participating in prescribed burns would be useful.
- Surely this crisis work would be considered a contribution to the defence of Australia, at a local scale.
- Fire and flood could be used as a weapon in wartime, against Australian interests.
- Defence force have a lot of machinery and equipment that should be used in disasters, including aircraft.
- Local resources are often stretched, and over long periods.

I believe the status quo should remain in relation to defence.

6.2 Fire adapted communities and resources for mitigation and crises

Approaches being used in the USA in relation to fire adapted communities, Firewise, local fire safe councils, the Ready, Set, Go! Program, improved funding to reduce fuel loads, undertaking prescribed burning, forest thinning and community involvement in fire management all need to be considered for Australia, but aren't being.

There is little active community involvement in fire management across Australia, only in a small number of cases. Heavy investment in avenues such as the fire adapted communities, firewise, local fire safe councils and the Ready, Set, Go! Program would be beneficial.

This is a critical step that Australia could make in regards to both mitigation and crisis management, a win win.

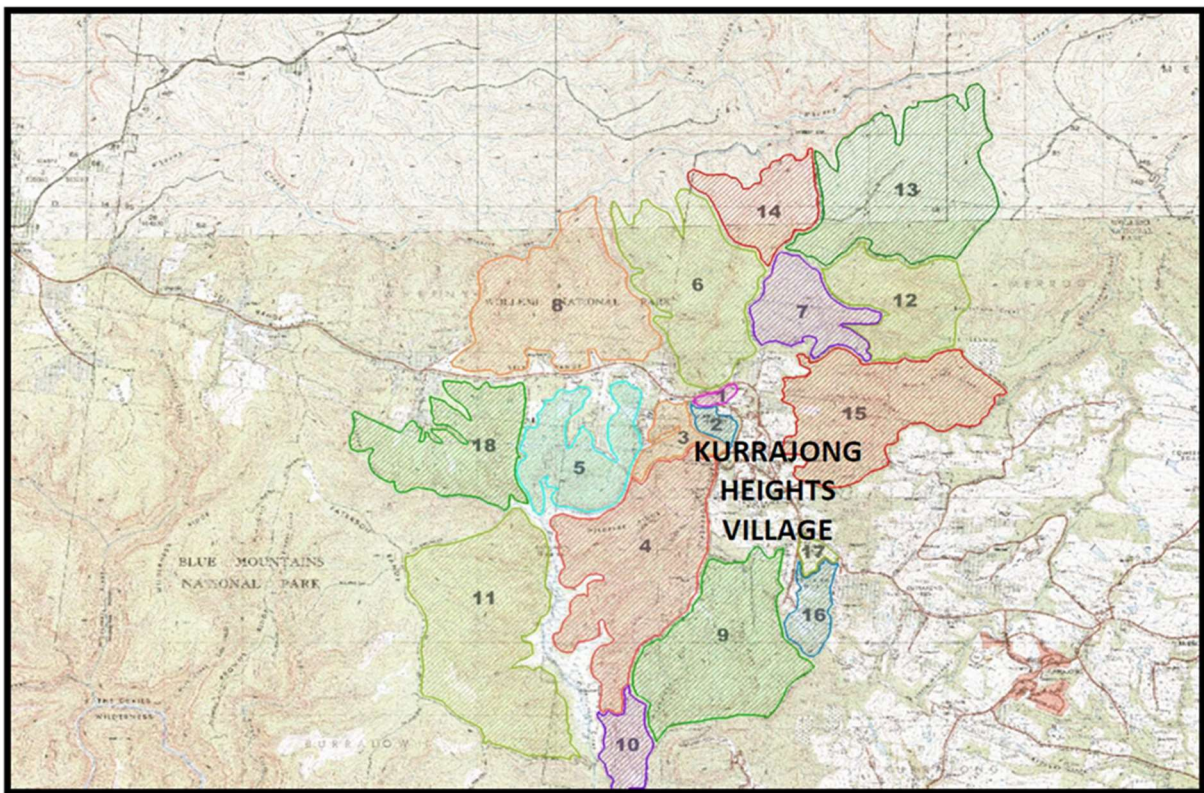
6.3 Communities better prepared for crises to manage bushfire mitigation and reduce crisis resources, a case study

Brian Williams submission to 2020 Bushfire Royal Commission:

Kurrajong Heights has a highly successful BFMP that has kept the community safe for 68 years. The Kurrajong Heights BFMP relies heavily on local knowledge.

Knowledge of terrain, fire behaviour and fire paths.

The Kurrajong Heights Brigade has developed and implemented a plan that hazard reduces blocks using a mosaic pattern. This strategy keeps low fuel areas as a blocking influence for approaching wildfire. Refer below



6.4 Bushfire mitigation training

As noted above, expanding the prescribed burning program to 8 % of forests per year provide a great training and expertise program that can be used in major bushfire crises where they occur.

Also refer to the Kurrajong Heights Brigade case study above.

6.5 State and federal failures in bushfire management resulting in the need for large resources in bushfire crises

There are many concern areas identified in:

<https://volunteerfirefighters.org.au/nema-national-preparedness-summit-in-canberra-from-25-to-26-september-2023>

These concerns need to be addressed using the opportunities outlined in the same document.

This would reduce resources needed in crises.

6.6 Flood disaster resources in crises and before

Disaster flooding areas like Lismore, Ballina and many other communities in south eastern Australia need updated mitigation measures and recovery funding urgently, with a massive focus on design and build of flood mitigation measures to minimise risk of future flooding in those areas. Shovel ready projects need to be progressed urgently. Where there are potential options available, the social and environmental costs of ongoing repeat flooding is not an acceptable option and agreed solutions need to be actioned.

There were many citizen rescues undertaken at Lismore. These people are important in crisis management, indeed critical, yet they have no insurance protection for themselves nor their equipment/ vehicles in relation to flood rescue. This is another issue that needs to be looked at in crisis management.

In relation to flood management in the Lismore crisis, I suspect a very large proportion of rescue work was by private citizens and their boats and other equipment. These brave citizens should not be paid, but should be protected in relation to serious injury or death, not small injuries. They would need to demonstrate their activities.

Resilience NSW approaches did not work at Lismore.

There is improved interoperability between RFS and SES.

6.7 Cross state border sharing of crisis resources

This works well in bushfires, not sure how well in flood disasters.

6.8 Individuals and private sector opportunities

I am not talking here about growing air force plane fleets for fire control, at the expense of sensible bushfire mitigation.

I raise opportunities in relation to bushfire mitigation and bushfire crisis management. I am talking about farmers, foresters, workers and others with good all-round skills that are and would be available in a time of crisis, usually without pay. It would be good to set up a system where skill sets in relation to disasters, fire and flooding could be provided to an applicable agency for quick OK of individuals, but this can't be a bureaucratic organisation such as state fire agencies. They would receive a disaster responder card, like a construction card. If bureaucratic, I would walk away.

There may be opportunities for the private sector in relation to crisis management that need to be better teased out.

The same applies to flood management in a crisis, I suspect a very large proportion of rescue work was by private citizens and their boats and other equipment. These brave citizens should not be paid, but should be protected in relation to serious injury or death, not small injuries. They would need to demonstrate their activities.

John O'Donnell

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