

Submission to Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

I wish to chiefly address the issues raised in dot point 3 fairly concisely, although there are carryovers to several of the other points to be addressed in the Discussion Paper.

1. In order to develop the potential of resilient communities, communities need to be supported to become knowledgeable, active, relatively self-contained as far as resourcing, power and telecommunications needs. This is a critical issue in supporting the fire fighting agencies and professional fire fighters, when they are over-stretched, as they were in Black Summer and will increasingly continue to be so as the future weather patterns and climate-induced scenarios increase in both frequency and intensity.
2. A NSW Fire and Rescue Community Fire Unit model is required and strategically located in remote and regional localities. During the Black Summer Fires, CFU training and resources could have proved a valuable asset to our small remote coastal community of Berrara to assist with and when Fire Fighting resources were stretched elsewhere and in key critical moments. Our family has been actively and operationally involved in our local CFU in the Mid Blue Mountains for over a decade and has greatly valued the support of F&R training and resources to assist the local neighbourhood to collectively become aware of fire preparation, preparedness and situational awareness. The model needs to be extended to jurisdictions outside of F&R Operational areas.
3. This point also leads to the acknowledgement and greater use of collective community knowledge of terrain, fire and flood history and leadership rather than the top-down approach that currently exists from remote control centres and head offices, together with better means of communication to local control points and local operational centres.
4. There is a critical need for far more reliable power and telecommunications in remote areas as was so apparent during Black Summer where the means to information and backup power to run pumps, water storage supplies, fridges and the internet failed time and again and for lengthy periods. Water mains proved inadequate throughout the remote villages of the Shoalhaven LGA over Black Summer, failing completely at critical incident times. The need for community power supplies and batteries is critical. They work and are readily available. We don't need any more reviews or test models.
5. There must be consistency across the states and territories regarding the immediate appointment of an Inspector General of Emergency Management as per the Queensland state model to ensure bi-partisan, non-political over-arching responsibility in ensuring that all efforts in emergency management are transparent, independent, efficient and timely. Greater interagency cooperation could be ensured minus the politics, egos and time-wasting nit-picking and inefficiencies which currently exist, especially once the emergency is over. There is a real need for accountability and independent review of actions, efforts, strategies, resourcing, and cost without naming and blaming.
6. Need for better mapping for communities to adequately implement fireplans and strategies in a timely manner. People should not be treated as stupid; they need good information on which to base decisions including "Stay and Defend" or to "Leave" with adequate time to minimize risk with evacuation. The 'Hazards Near Me' app in NSW has not improved in regular updates or accuracy.

7. Finally it may prove useful to look at Disaster Management models being applied in other countries, particularly those in developing nations where funds and resources are limited and therefore the efficient use of particularly the volunteer movement assisting the Fire-fighting agencies, the military and the civil police services proves to be a valuable disaster management tool. I was fortunate to serve as an Australian Volunteer with the Bhutanese Department of Forest and Park Services several years ago in their Forest Fire Management Unit training volunteers, fire fighters, rangers, police and military officers in the basics of safety on the fire line and saw first-hand how a large federally-organised volunteer movement can assist the military and fire fighters in forest fires, flood crises and other climate-induced and human-caused disasters when resources are limited (i.e. very little fire-fighting vehicles and equipment, other than hand tools and two helicopters serving the entire country). A Nationally funded and organized volunteer civil defence service would go a long way to serve the professionally trained fire fighters, communities and perhaps reduce what is often seen as the conflicting efforts and duplication of actions of the SES and volunteer fire fighters in each state. It would also offer an alternative to much deployment currently relied upon from the ADF.

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