

# Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

## NSW Government Submission

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The NSW Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the 'Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper' (the Discussion Paper).

In recent years, NSW has experienced firsthand the challenges of responding to and recovering from more frequent, protracted and compounding emergencies. As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, these are shared challenges and a whole of community approach is required.

States and Territories, as the level of government with primary responsibility and accountability for emergency management, are particularly well placed to inform the Commonwealth's consideration of what crisis response capabilities it should focus on to meet this growing challenge and how this should be managed to ensure they support and complement state-based efforts.

It will be critical for the Commonwealth to work closely with States and Territories as it continues to consider these issues, to ensure a coordinated and well-integrated approach that avoids duplication.

### **An ongoing role for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will be critical to maintaining an appropriate level of crisis response capability**

The Defence Strategic Review recognised that there should be an ongoing role for the ADF in providing support as a last resort for domestic aid to the civil community. It is pleasing to see the Discussion Paper also reaffirm that the ADF will continue to be available to assist States and Territories to respond to emergencies in extreme circumstances or where specialist capabilities are required.

NSW considers that the circumstances in which it requests ADF assistance are already consistent with these parameters. As an example, NSW made:

- Thirty-three (33) requests for assistance during the 2019/20 bushfire season, primarily relating to the use of defence premises, transport, and logistics (including aviation capability), route clearance and damage assessment.
- Thirty-eight (38) requests for assistance between March and December 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily related to quarantine and border closure compliance activities and contract tracing support.
- Sixteen (16) requests for assistance during the 2021/22 flood events, primarily relating to enhancing our own capabilities through aviation support with night-time capabilities to undertake search and rescue, evacuation support, logistics support and immediate relief and clean-up activities.

In each of these circumstances, the ADF provided critical support in the provision of specialist capabilities to undertake high risk or complex functions, or more generalist support functions in extreme circumstances where the scale of the emergency was such additional surge capacity was required.

It could be envisaged that in the future, surge capacity to undertake less specialised functions could be met in part by community members mobilised as part of a volunteer or other workforce. NSW has uplifted its capability as a result of significant bushfires and flood events, particularly in the area of large aviation capacity and night rescue capacity. However, there would still be a deficit in the heavy lift and other equipment capability that the ADF provides without targeted investment to build an alternate source of this support.

### **A strengthened role for the Commonwealth in supporting national training and resource sharing would enhance disaster resilience and response arrangements**

The Commonwealth, via the National Emergency Management Agency, is in a unique position to support increased collaboration and interoperability between jurisdictions and sectors by strengthening its role in relation to training and the coordination of resource sharing.

In relation to training, for example, despite the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience's Crisis Appreciation and Strategic Planning model being nationally agreed under the National Capability model, there is no consistent training package or model to support its application. The development of a standardised training package to support this model, and other agreed national frameworks including the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System, would improve interoperability and consistency in approach and communication between jurisdictions during emergencies.

In relation to resource sharing, increased Commonwealth support for the current arrangements for coordinating resource sharing outside of jurisdictional boundaries through the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council National Resource Sharing Centre should be considered. The current arrangement has been developed over many years through cooperation and investment by all States and Territories, and there are strong established links between each member agency. An increase in Commonwealth funding to support and build on this capability would enhance the national response through enhanced coordination.

### **There are specific areas of operational capability that should be enhanced at a Commonwealth level**

This is because the area of capability aligns with existing Commonwealth roles and responsibilities, or there is benefit to a national coordinated approach. These areas include:

- *Quarantine.* In line with the Commonwealth's constitutional responsibility for managing Australia's borders, it is essential that the Commonwealth takes responsibility for preparing and providing traveller quarantine capability. Traveller quarantine was an important line of defence in successfully limiting the spread of COVID-19 in Australia and should be a key capability into the future.
- *Aviation resources.* The additional investment in the National Aerial Firefighting Centre to add a (Large Air Tanker) to the national capability is a welcome response to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, which recommended the development of a sovereign aerial firefighting capability. It is noted that is currently a short-term investment. In an environment of financial competition for leased LATs and longer fire seasons, as well as increased competition for other aerial capability such as night capable rotary wing search and rescue aircraft, continued Commonwealth investment to longer term state aviation assets would provide a valuable and cost-effective support for state and territory led emergency response.
- *Spatial information and analysis.* This includes enhanced digital capabilities such as remote sensing and smart sensors, strengthened data sharing (including live feeds and services) across all levels of government and the private sector, better use of Commonwealth capabilities to share important infrastructure data, and continued engagement with international charters for satellite imagery, operation of the Sentinel lightning detection system, and processing of

national level land use, Normalised Difference Vegetation Index data and other inputs to fire behaviour modelling.

- *National alerts.* Enhancements should be made to the National Emergency Warning System, Emergency Alert, to bring it in to line with similar emergency alert networks in other countries. This includes addressing the current limitations which restrict how many mobile phone services can be reached by any one Emergency Alert campaign and prevent more than one jurisdiction issuing their warnings at the same time. This currently requires considerable coordination to ensure all affected communities receive warnings and has an impact on the timeframe in issuing warnings. While Emergency Alert is a national system managed by Victoria, this would require advocacy and support from the Commonwealth around creating public safety obligations on the telecommunications carriers. In relation to the Cell Broadcast based National Message Warning System being developed by the Commonwealth, further efforts should be taken to ensure that it is built and integrated into state based operational systems to ensure it is fit for purpose for community warnings.
- *Logistics and supply chain.* This could be an area the Commonwealth considers building alternative capability to the ADF, for use in crisis response. NSW emergency service organisations regularly rely on inter-agency or interstate solutions, including ADF support. Rather than using ADF vehicles and personnel, civilian transport contractors working within the ADF, or other Commonwealth government department supply chains could be made available.
- *Telecommunications and systems infrastructure.* This includes changes to telecommunications legislation to ensure sharing of network availability and coverage capabilities, and stronger approaches to whole-of-government licensing arrangements for emergency data and systems, including satellite technology.
- *Data and insights:* Including improved approaches to the collection and sharing of risk and resilience data sets and modelling across jurisdiction, stronger data sharing frameworks supported by data sharing provisions that allow timely sharing of information between agencies and across jurisdictions to support evidence-based decision making. To ensure seamless data collection and intelligence gathering, any Commonwealth capability must collect data in the format required by the states and territories.
- *Industry engagement.* For example, engagement with the insurance industry to identify mitigation programs across jurisdictions to benefit insurance agencies and encourage participation and investment into mitigation strategies.
- *Collaboration with emergency services organisations.* NSW agencies have close working relationships with the Commonwealth and would welcome the opportunity to strengthen these. A priority area for this would be strengthened investment in collaboration between the Bureau of Meteorology and emergency services organisations to provide a greater capability to identify weather event risks and disseminate appropriate warnings faster, for example by fully funding the Bureau positions embedded in the NSW State Emergency Service and NSW Rural Fire Service and extending this model to other organisations as appropriate.
- *Incentivising and providing financial support for volunteers and part-time, on-call firefighters.* Opportunities could be considered to incentivise employers to release staff to support crisis response activities, and/or to provide financial support to volunteers and retained firefighters who need to take time off work to do so. This may include consideration of opportunities for tax relief.
- *National multi-agency exercising.* The Commonwealth could take a leadership role in facilitating exercises to test arrangements for the management of concurrent severe-to-catastrophic events involving multiple jurisdictions. This will assist with understanding existing collective capabilities and capacity for a range of hazard scenarios.

- *Research and innovation:* Continued investment in research and innovation priorities, governance frameworks and utilisation to enable evidence-based decision making through initiatives such as Natural Hazards Research Australia.

### **Initiatives to build community resilience and capability are supported, but need to be designed to complement existing response and recovery arrangements**

Community members will always be the first responders to most emergencies. In the face of increasingly frequent and severe disasters, it is increasingly important to invest in building community resilience and capability, and empowering communities to respond in the event of an emergency.

Recent disasters in NSW have highlighted the increasing role of community led emergent groups and spontaneous volunteers, particularly during the response and recovery phase. These volunteers have largely operated in parallel to the official response, supplementing the role of formal emergency services organisations and recovery organisations.

NSW is currently considering opportunities to better integrate spontaneous volunteers into its emergency management framework, building on the existing work of organisations such as the NSW State Emergency Service, in recognition of the important role that they play.

In considering initiatives to build community resilience and capability as an alternate to ADF support, it will be critical for the Commonwealth to ensure that any activity:

- Does not duplicate or compete with state-based capability. NSW emergency response and recovery organisations have mature, well established volunteer bases that have been built up over many years. New models for building community capability should seek to uplift existing state capabilities, not develop competing capabilities, attract existing volunteers, or compete with existing organisations for new volunteers.
- Is integrated within existing state-based command and control structures. Emergency response and recovery efforts occur within existing well established emergency management arrangements. Community capability needs to be deployed at the request of, and coordinated by, the relevant lead agency to ensure an effective coordination of efforts.
- Recognise the importance of supporting and empowering local communities in areas of high disaster risk. This is vital to building community connection and resilience and is also more sustainable and cost effective than transporting people to impacted locations.
- Build on existing work underway. For example, the NSW Government is currently working with a number of Discrete Aboriginal Communities to support them to lead and co-design local arrangements for the preparation for, response to and recovery from disasters as part of the Aboriginal Community Emergency Management Program and would welcome the opportunity to partner with the Commonwealth on this work.
- Supports existing state-based capability. While NSW continues to actively build capability to engage with mobilised communities and informal volunteers, challenges remain that the Commonwealth can assist in resolving– including volunteer insurance and considerations in the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements to support the coordination of informal volunteer activities.