Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper – South Australian Government Emergency Management Sector Response

September 2023

Government of
South Australia

Introduction

The South Australian Government emergency management sector welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response consultation process through this submission to the discussion paper released in August 2023. This submission has been prepared at officer level in consultation with South Australian Police, South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission, the Department of Treasury and Finance, Metropolitan Fire Service, South Australian State Emergency Service and the Country Fire Service and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet.

South Australia has periodically called for Australian Defence Force (ADF) resources under the Commonwealth Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN) arrangements. ADF resources have augmented state agencies and interstate emergency services support and delivered capabilities not maintained by jurisdictional emergency service organisations.

Some notable large-scale events involving South Australia's use of ADF resources include:

- 2005 Wangary Fires
- 2005 Kangaroo Island Fires
- 2009 Bushfire Season
- 2010/11 Floods
- 2016 Floods

- 2019/2020 Bushfires
- 2020 COVID-19 response
- 2022 Ex Tropical Cyclone Tiffany Floods
- 2022/23 River Murray Flood

Noting the findings of the recent Defence Strategic Review, the structure and capacity of the ADF does not allow for it to sustainably undertake its core function, defending Australia and its national interests, in addition to acting as a domestic disaster response and recovery agency. However, this does not fully reflect that the historical reality shows the ADF's structure, equipment, personnel, major platforms, and systems have in fact provided a foundational basis for the ADF to deliver national surge capabilities for disaster response and recovery efforts – supporting communities in the national interest. This has been enacted both at large scale and effectiveness over many years.

Recognising the increasing complexity and frequency of disasters, development of sector capability and capacity in a coordinated way at both a national and state level is crucial to ensuring all levels of government are able to effectively enact their roles and responsibilities. Any investment should be considered closely, balancing new, innovative capabilities with expansion or modernisation of existing capabilities and systems that are effective but under resourced or undercapitalised.

Noting the questions posed in the August 2023 discussion paper, this submission, developed at officer level, identifies key themes that should be considered as part of ongoing policy development in this area. These themes are inherently interconnected in nature and should be considered as part of a holistic multi-faceted approach. It is also important to note that while this submission explores a number of considerations for alternative Commonwealth capabilities, further consultation, and policy development is required to develop a fit for purpose solution.

Capability – Personnel and Resources

Response to disasters includes the capabilities necessary to stabilise an incident, save lives, protect property and the environment, meet basic human needs, restore community lifeline services and other basic community functionality, and establish a safe and secure environment to facilitate the integration of recovery activities. These capabilities currently delivered by emergency management agencies are high dependency and high reliability capabilities that rely on support agencies such as the Commonwealth or ADF having similar assurances of their own capability.

The capabilities required currently provided by the ADF can be broadly divided into two categories – personnel and resources. When developing a model for alternative crisis capabilities, consideration should be given to a multi-pronged approach that incorporates supplementing state capability, replacing Commonwealth capability that is currently provided by the ADF and facilitating an environment that allows for streamlined capability sharing between states.

Any alternative approach to provision of crisis capabilities should consider:

- Investment in states to increase full-time emergency response staff to manage longer and more frequent events.
- Labour market capacity causing challenges with recruitment.
- Ensuring any national surge capacity of crisis response personnel does not detract from the ability of emergency services to recruit volunteers.
- Duplication and efficiency of crisis capabilities being delivered by an alternative or new Commonwealth led organisation; considering the existing resources and personnel expertise held by the ADF and the overheads for many of the inputs including infrastructure, specialised assets and operating platforms.
- Adaptation or expansion of existing structures and capabilities that are connected or adjacent to the ADF such as Defence Force Reserves.
- Capacity building initiatives such as support for an emergency management professionalisation programs and other training to build capacity across the sector's workforce and volunteer organisations.
- Investing in state-based emergency service organisations to grow their resource capability in lieu of utilising ADF resources. This includes resources such as heavy machinery, aircraft and winching and rescue capability.
- Maintaining a database of state and Commonwealth capabilities across Australia for emergency service agencies to rapidly access via the national coordination mechanism and other frameworks such as the AFAC national resource sharing centre.
- Avoiding the creation of new structures or mechanisms where existing processes are fit for purpose but may require additional investment or modernisation.
- Utilising the national stockpile initiative to fill specific crisis response capability gaps for states through close consultation with emergency management agencies.

Government of South Australia

Implementation and Governance

A fundamental consideration of any alternative Commonwealth capabilities for crisis response is implementation, governance and integration into the existing emergency management ecosystem. As noted in the discussion paper, any options will need to be scalable and able to support and integrate with state and territory arrangements. It is also especially important for any Commonwealth support to have clear points of escalation, activation and, importantly, timeliness. While it is understood the principle of utilising ADF resources as a 'last resort' is expected to be maintained, or potentially strengthened through the development of an alternative capability; understanding escalation points and navigation of multiple layers of Commonwealth support mechanisms (such as NEMA, ADF or alternative crisis response capability) in a timely way is critical for states in protecting their communities. In practice, having state and territory response agencies wait for local resources to be exhausted and for all alternatives to be utilised before a request for Commonwealth or ADF assistance is considered and operationalised risks the provision of essential and urgent support to disaster affected communities that is "just too late" rather than "just in time".

Key considerations around the implementation and governance of alternative crisis capabilities should include:

- South Australia has well-practiced arrangements in place to integrate ADF resources into operations. If an alternative crisis capability outside of the ADF is implemented, it is fundamental that it is fit for purpose with existing emergency management arrangements and state-based legislation.
- Effective integration of any capabilities that are to be delivered by non-ADF partners will require consideration of routine engagement, alignment and stakeholder orientation activities.
- Relevant powers and protections of personnel involved in delivering national capability. This would include the extent to which Return to Work or Comcare protections would be afforded to volunteers or employees engaged by industry or NGOs delivering support services.
- Implementation of control and command structures to ensure response efforts are maximised while integrating and respecting the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of all participating organisations. An agreed structure will need to be used by all levels of government, as well as many NGOs and private sector organisations, particularly when no single jurisdiction, agency, or organisation has primary authority.
- Clarity of thresholds, activation and resources that are available to support states and territories to ensure a timely response and appropriate points of escalation; particularly where multiple layers of Commonwealth support may be available.
- Preparation for competition for finite resources between states and territories that are sourced either domestically or internationally.

Non-Government Sector – Community and Private and Volunteer

Emergency management across the *Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery* spectrum is a shared responsibility that requires engagement and involvement from NGOs and private sector. Government resources alone cannot provide all the solutions when responding to incidents and when severe incidents disrupt community lifelines or economic stability, private sector and NGO capabilities can assist with restoring and providing essential services both socially and economically. When government, volunteer, private sector and NGO resources are coordinated, aligned and working within a clear operating environment, mutually beneficial incident-specific response can be provided that is optimised to meet the needs and expectations of an impacted community.

There is an opportunity through the consideration of alternative crisis response mechanisms to enhance the volunteer ecosystem, strengthen disaster response capabilities outside of government and put systems and arrangements in place for streamlined sharing or mobilisation of resources. This can be complemented by local and regional coordination of existing surge labour and equipment resources within communities.

Any alternative Commonwealth crisis response capability must consider close engagement and partnership with the non-government sector. Key considerations should include:

- Facilitating an enabling policy environment for effective and flexible recruitment and deployment of volunteers with a view to growing the emergency services volunteer membership base.
- Encouraging increased private sector investment through financial incentives, fostering public-private partnerships, and developing supportive regulatory frameworks.
- When catastrophic incidents put a premium on the restoration of complex supply chains (especially for essential products and services needed for response efforts and stabilising the economy), private sector coordination and assets are vital for public health and safety, the economy, and national security.
- Private companies have valuable technological expertise, and specialised skills to complement disaster response efforts.
- Integrating NGOs, private sector stakeholders and allied support industries into national emergency management networks and forums to understand capacity and facilitate a coordinated response.
- Greater involvement of NGOs or non-traditional volunteer capacities, including those which are state and territory specific, to enhance the volunteer ecosystem, empower communities and strengthen disaster response capabilities.

Resilience and Preparedness

Supporting Australian communities to be more resilient and prepared for disasters is critical to meeting the challenges of the evolving strategic environment and reducing both the expectation and/or requirement of escalated levels of support by the ADF in response to a disaster.

A resilient community is characterised by strong connections among its members, who often engage in self-organisation following an event. Resilience is a long-term commitment that necessitates cultural change and a multi-faceted approach. To achieve this, programs need to be rolled out nationally, at scale to reach communities and then customised to address unique local needs. It is recognised that the long lasting social and economic impacts of disasters depend on proactive and well-targeted investment. For return on investment, to reduce response and recovery costs and empower and protect communities, prevention and preparedness measures should be a priority.

Additional support for improving resilience as a complementary capability to crisis response should consider:
- Promotion of disaster preparedness and resilience through national campaigns, such as a national roll out of #30days30ways campaign recently launched in South Australia, which encourages a 'bottom up' engagement approach to preparedness and resilience building.
- Community messaging at a nation-wide level regarding the shared responsibility of disaster resilience and preparedness (such as New Zealand's three-day household emergency planning).
- Strengthening critical and essential infrastructure against threats and future climate impacts, including transportation, energy, and telecommunications systems.
- Increasing funding for research and development that supports innovative solutions to better understand the impacts of climate change and disasters on emergency preparedness including collaboration between researchers, emergency services, and government agencies.

For more information:
dpcsecurityemergencyandrecoverymanagement@sa.gov.au