



File Reference: BS10051456

Date: 17 April 2020

## **DEFENCE SUBMISSION TO THE NSW INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE NSW BUSHFIRE SEASON 2019–2020**

### **References:**

- A. NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry–Terms of Reference dated 10 February 2020
- B. NSW Request for information re ADF response deployment dated 18 March 2020

### **Introduction**

1. The Head of the New South Wales (NSW) Independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 Bushfires invited Defence to provide a submission to their inquiry into the 2019–20 NSW Fire Season. This submission focuses particularly on the coordination and collaboration between Defence and NSW Government aspects of the terms of reference. The Heads of the Inquiry wrote separately to Defence with ‘a Request for information re ADF response deployment’ and these are addressed at the attachment to this submission. This Defence submission provides details on the broader Defence efforts in responding to natural disasters and emergencies across the nation, and then outlines specific activities conducted in NSW.

### **Overview**

2. Defence<sup>1</sup> commenced providing emergency support to state and territory governments fighting bushfires in September 2019; support to NSW began in September 2019 when Defence commenced responding to bushfire related Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) Category 1 – local emergency assistance requests. Defence commenced support to NSW emergency services under DACC Category 2 – significant emergency assistance on 08 November 2019, following activation of the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN).<sup>2</sup> Defence established Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST 2019–20 on 31 December 2019.

3. Under Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST 2019–20 the Australian Defence Force<sup>3</sup> established three state/territory based Joint Task Forces to support state/territory emergency management authorities. Joint Task Force 1110 was established in NSW. Commencing on 3 January 2020, the Chief of the Defence Force appointed Major General Ellwood as the Emergency Australian Defence Force National Support Coordinator to support the states and territories. On 4 January 2020, given the national scale of the bushfires, the Governor-General

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Defence” refers to the civilian and service elements of the Department of Defence.

<sup>2</sup> The COMDISPLAN is the plan for the provision of Australian Government non-financial assistance to Australian states and territories in an emergency or disaster. COMDISPLAN was activated for NSW and VIC on 31 October 2019 and 19 December 2019 respectively. COMDISPLAN for SA and WA was activated on 4 and 7 January 2020 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Australian Defence Force” refers to the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army, and the Royal Australian Air Force.

initiated a call out of Reserve Force elements to enhance the deployed Joint Task Forces as part of a wider activation of the Australian Defence Force.

4. The scale, scope and duration of support during Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST 2019–20, saw a whole-of-Defence response. Australian Defence Force personnel and capabilities, Australian Public Service and Defence contractor personnel, and facilities all played a role supporting the emergency response, communities and emergency service operations.

5. From November 2019 to February 2020 Defence opened bases across QLD, NSW, VIC and SA to provide accommodation to firefighters. On 4 January 2020 Defence opened additional bases throughout the bushfire affected regions to provide temporary accommodation for displaced persons.

6. International Defence Forces from New Zealand, Canada, the United States of America, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Indonesia and Japan also deployed personnel, aircraft (fixed and rotary-wing) to assist in the bushfire response, including to NSW sites.

### **Preparation for Natural Disasters and Emergencies**

7. The primary role of Defence is to provide for the security of Australia. However, Australian Defence Force capabilities can be, and are, used to provide support to natural disaster and emergency responses in-line with the relative priority of missions.

8. Throughout 2019 and into 2020, Defence supported a wide range of natural disaster and emergency response support demands, from major flooding and emergency support in North Queensland, to fires in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Defence made a substantial, long-term, National scale contribution in support of the bushfire emergency response and is now providing significant National scale support to the Federal and state COVID–19 response.

9. Defence assesses risk, conducts planning and prepares to support emergency responses as part of a whole-of-government framework. Defence collaborates with Emergency Management Australia and liaises with state and territory authorities in this process.

10. Defence conducts annual planning for the high risk weather season. In this process, Defence considers the Bureau of Meteorology outlook for the nation and the region and considers potential risks and possible requirements for emergency support. With continuing drought in much of the nation and forecast dry conditions, planning in 2019 included specific consideration of the widespread and significant bushfire risk.

11. Defence postures a range of force elements to support state and territory emergency services during the high-risk weather season. In December 2019<sup>4</sup>, in addition to these measures, Defence conducted a call-out validation activity for the Reserve.

12. The call-out validation activity formalised the procedural arrangements enshrined within the *Defence Act 1903* as legislated in 2000, for calling out Reservists in response to civil aid, humanitarian assistance, medical or civil emergency or disaster relief requirements. The purpose of the validation was to ensure the Defence call-out process, system and arrangements could be quickly and efficiently employed should a large scale call out be required. Defence

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<sup>4</sup> Operation Civil Assist begun on 28 November and ended on 7 December.

issued the call-out system using a real task and scenario but at a small-scale. The call-out validation activity was initiated by Defence based on the Defence assessment of the scale and duration of the bushfire threat, given the long-term weather forecast.

### **Respective Roles and Responsibilities for Natural Disaster Planning, Mitigation, Response and Recovery**

13. Australia's natural disaster management arrangements reflect the federal system of government, which apportions constitutional powers and responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. States and territories are generally responsible for the protection of life, property and the environment, and perform this function through the various emergency services and agencies that function in each jurisdiction. By contrast, the Commonwealth Parliament's legislative capacity is limited to the expressed and implied powers in the Constitution. In many cases, this constrains the actions that Commonwealth agencies and the Australian Defence Force may legally undertake.

14. If a natural disaster either exceeds or exhausts state or territory response capabilities (government, community or commercial), or where resources cannot be mobilised in sufficient time, some forms of Commonwealth assistance may be requested or offered, and the capabilities held by federal government agencies may be applied.

15. Emergency Management Australia, within the Department of Home Affairs, is responsible for whole-of-government planning and the coordination of Commonwealth assistance to the states and territories. The COMDISPLAN is prepared and maintained by Emergency Management Australia as a contingency plan for the provision of Commonwealth Government assistance to states and territories. The Director General of Emergency Management Australia is authorised to activate the COMDISPLAN and to commence the processes by which Commonwealth government assistance is approved and coordinated.

16. Defence supports the whole-of-government response to natural disasters and emergencies through its Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) arrangements. The aim of these DACC arrangements is to ensure that the procedures and mechanisms for initiating, approving and obtaining Defence assistance are as efficient and effective as possible.

17. Subsequent to the activation of the COMDISPLAN, states and territories must submit a formal request for assistance from Defence using a request for DACC. The request—submitted by the state or territory—allows Defence to assess the type of response that will be required before agreeing to provide the assistance.

18. Defence has standing liaison arrangements with all states and territories to coordinate and enable Defence support if required. DACC support, as articulated in the DACC Manual, is normally short term in nature, provided on a non-enduring basis and does not grant any rights to the organisation or individual receiving assistance. DACC is divided into two classes, emergency and non-emergency, and comprises six categories as follows:

#### **Emergency Assistance:**

- Category 1 – local emergency assistance (DACC 1)
- Category 2 – significant emergency assistance (DACC 2)
- Category 3 – emergency recovery assistance (DACC 3)

### **Non-emergency Assistance:**

- Category 4 – significant non-emergency assistance (DACC 4)
- Category 5 – local non-emergency assistance of a minor nature (DACC 5)
- Category 6 – law enforcement assistance (DACC 6).<sup>5</sup>

Defence is to provide the appropriate level of response in both emergency and non-emergency situations based on Government direction and in accordance with the policy and procedures outlined in the DACC Manual.

19. Defence Joint Operations Support Staff (JOSS) officers conduct regular liaison between Defence and civil agencies on a variety of convergent issues, and represent Defence on all civilian state and territory level emergency management committees. During civil emergencies, civil emergency management authorities may request Australian Defence Force Liaison Officers to establish initial liaison capability with Defence and to provide advice on DACC support. JOSS officers provided liaison to NSW emergency management organisations from 31 October 2019.

20. Defence collaborates with state and territory agencies to build mutual understanding of the capabilities Defence can offer emergency authorities prior to, and during, fire and other emergency events. Where possible, collaborative arrangements for Defence establishments are documented in memorandum of understanding between agencies, and in local-level mutual aid agreements that set down detailed operational requirements for individual Defence properties.

21. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is currently in place between the Commonwealth Department of Finance and the New South Wales State Government (Finance MoU). This Finance MoU makes provisions for Defence and other Commonwealth agencies, based in NSW, to receive fire-fighting response (equal to that provided to NSW residents) through payment of an annual levy. Defence also has strategic engagement with the states and territories through consultative forums. These forums ensure contacts are established and issues are discussed between respective Government agencies.

### **Defence Support to the NSW Bushfire Emergency Response**

22. Support to NSW bushfire emergency response began in September 2019 when Defence commenced responding to NSW bushfire related DACC Category 1 – local emergency assistance requests. On 31 October 2019, in response to a formal request for Australian Government assistance to support the bushfire activity in NSW, Emergency Management Australia activated the COMDISPLAN. Concurrently, Defence JOSS established a presence at the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Headquarters at Homebush and at the State Emergency Operations Centre in Casino. At this time, Defence commenced support to NSW emergency services under DACC Category 2 – significant emergency assistance.

23. On 8 November 2019, Defence provided support to NSW through the NSW Office of Emergency Management with airlift (rotary-wing – helicopter), search, rescue, fire mapping, refuelling and ground support for commercially operated aircraft responding to the bushfire emergency.<sup>6</sup> From 11 November 2019, accommodation and catering was also provided to state

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Manual*, Canberra, 2017, p. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Defence also assisted with the loading of fire retardant onto fire-fighting aircraft at Casino Airport, reducing turn-around times and increasing aircraft flight rates.

and interstate fire fighters at Singleton Military Area (Lone Pine Barracks) and RAAF Base Richmond.

24. On 27 December 2019, to further improve Defence's ability to support the NSW authorities, Defence personnel were deployed into RFS Incident Management Teams at Fire Control Centres throughout NSW. These personnel provided specialist advice on possible ADF support under DACC arrangements and scoped options for ADF support during initial post-bushfire recovery operations.

### **NSW Aid, disaster relief and recovery**

25. As the bushfire crisis worsened (December and into January), and in response to additional requests for support from the NSW State Government, on 4 January 2020, Defence significantly increased the support being provided to NSW.

26. To ensure a more rapid response to the worsening situation direct negotiations between the ADF and RFS commenced to enable Defence to integrate assets and provide the support required.

27. In cooperation with NSW authorities, Defence provided a considerable response, deploying approximately 2 600 personnel<sup>7</sup> to regional areas of NSW impacted by the bushfires including: the Northern, Central and Southern Tablelands; South West and Northwest Slopes and Plains; and the Snowy Mountain, Illawarra, Hunter and Blue Mountain areas.

28. The support in these areas was coordinated by the NSW Office of Emergency Management who requested that all regional and local government areas identify recovery tasks for the ADF to assist with relief and recovery support to affected towns and communities.

29. Defence support enhanced and complemented the NSW State's capabilities, completing tasks including, but not limited to:

- supporting firefighting efforts through the provision of accommodation, meals, air and ground transport for fire strike teams and other support personnel
- provision of over 1 100 stretchers to evacuation centres for displaced persons
- the rapid assessment of damaged assets in declared disaster areas via ground and air capabilities<sup>8</sup>
- improving mobility and access to critical infrastructure through the clearance of roads and fire trails using engineer personnel and assets<sup>9</sup>
- assisting in the creation of fire breaks and tree felling using engineering plant and equipment
- assisting NSW and Australian Federal Police with community doorknocking tasks
- restoration and remediation of Mogo Zoo, Eurobodalla Botanic Gardens and the Glenbogan (Bega Valley) radio station.
- clearing of roads, railway lines, properties and fence repairs

<sup>7</sup> While Army contributed the majority of personnel to the NSW response and recovery effort, significant support was also provided by Navy and Air Force.

<sup>8</sup> Aerial damage assessment was undertaken by Defence air capabilities including fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. Of note, these aerial capabilities provided rapid, time-critical general fire damage assessment, route information to inform clearance activities, accessibility assessments, and information on livestock and waterways.

<sup>9</sup> Additional Defence personnel were upskilled with chainsaw and related skills to supplement extant Defence engineering capabilities in support of vegetation management and bushfire damage remediation.

- road, bridge and airstrip remediation
- providing emergency relief, medical provisions, and management of donated goods
- supporting the repatriation of displaced persons
- installation of water purification systems and the refilling of private and public water tanks
- delivery of generators, fuel, food, fodder and potable water to isolated towns, farms and affected communities
- provision of veterinary services, wildlife rescue and support to animal welfare agencies
- installation of temporary fence lines on boundaries of private properties and public roads to assist with managing livestock
- assisting Services Australia and other Government agencies' staff in the establishment of support service 'Pop-up kiosks' into affected communities
- recovery of vehicles and aircraft.

### **Case Study: Engineer Crews clearing vital links**

Queensland-based Army engineers (from 2<sup>nd</sup> Combat Engineer Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Enoggera) cleared bushfire-affected sections of the Monaro Highway between Bombala, NSW, and Cann River in Victoria. Combat engineers used chainsaws to remove trees which had fallen onto parts of the highway.

A plant operator from 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Support Regiment, also from Enoggera, Lance Corporal Adrian Bateman, removed the tree material from the road, enabling bushfire units to move more quickly to fires threatening areas of Gippsland south of Cann River.

Working alongside the ADF personnel, NSW Forestry Corporation forester Andre Le Lievre said it was great having the support of the ADF for the fires. "They have been instrumental in getting main roads and highways open to assist with the firefighting effort and supporting the local communities," Mr Le Lievre said.

Training Warrant Officer at 2/17 Royal NSW Regiment Paul Chang is an ADF liaison officer attached working with NSW emergency services in Cooma. "The ADF has been really well received by the local emergency services and has been well-integrated into their team," Warrant Officer Chang said.

Source: Department of Defence.

30. Defence was also requested to respond to the emergency situation developing on the NSW South Coast. On 4 January 2020, at short notice and with support of Defence contractors<sup>10</sup>, HMAS *Adelaide* sailed from Sydney to Twofold Bay Eden. The township of Eden had become isolated by bushfire, with residents and tourists forced to take refuge on the beach and at Eden wharf.

31. HMAS *Adelaide*, with embarked Defence personnel and emergency supplies, arrived in Twofold Bay on 5 January 2020. On arrival, Defence commenced liaison with local authorities, police and fire services to determine the extent of the support required by the

<sup>10</sup> HMAS *Adelaide* sailed from Sydney at short notice while scheduled maintenance was being undertaken. This maintenance required specialist contracted maintenance personnel to sail with the ship and complete the repairs enroute to Twofold Bay, Eden. The repairs and subsequent test and trial procedures were successfully concluded during transit.

community. *Adelaide* was also equipped with an on-board medical capability allowing medical staff to provide support to the local communities.

32. In preparation for community evacuation, HMAS *Adelaide* was reconfigured to provide emergency accommodation for any potential evacuees. Ship's crew prepared bedding, refreshments and care facilities to cater for arrivals including their pets. *Adelaide* also prepared for assistance activities ranging from medical care, food packages and communications to engineering support.<sup>11</sup>

33. Following the support provided at Eden, HMAS *Adelaide* undertook relief operations in support of the Victorian bush fire emergency before returning to NSW where the towns surrounding Merimbula and Batemans Bay were under threat. Communities were again sheltering on the beaches with all land access points cut off by fire. Similarly to Eden, *Adelaide* was made available to provide medical support and supplies to the local authorities and community if needed.

### **Air support**

34. Defence provided air support as a key element of support to NSW's emergency response. Air support commenced on 8 November 2019, with ground support provided to fire-fighting aircraft including refuelling, refilling of fire retardant, and maintenance support at various locations across NSW. Aircraft support activities also saw the transport of cargo and interstate fire-fighting personnel into affected regional areas. Various fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft and unmanned aerial systems undertook flights in support of personnel and cargo movement, and bushfire and damage assessment.

35. Defence air support was concentrated on those areas in NSW, which were facing the greatest threat from the bushfires. Defence provided ground support to civilian airports and airfields based in the affected regions.

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<sup>11</sup> While HMAS *Adelaide* was readied for civilian evacuation, the emergency situation improved and no persons were required to be evacuated to the ship.

## Case Study: Defence RAAF Striker Aircraft Rescue and Firefighting Vehicle Support

Firefighters from RAAF Base Richmond's No. 22 Squadron supported helicopter operations to fight bushfires southwest of Sydney. Commencing on 21 December 2019, No. 22 Squadron deployed a Striker Aircraft Rescue and Firefighting (ARFF) vehicle and firefighting crew to airfields in Picton and Mittagong. Helicopters landed at these bases to refuel during missions to nearby bushfires.

Sergeant Matthew Allen, Airfield Fire Controller with No. 22 Squadron, said the presence of a RAAF Striker ARFF vehicle and crew was welcomed by civilian firefighters. "Our presence at these airfields frees up NSW Fire and Rescue and RFS resources to join in firefighting operations," Sergeant Allen said. "The RFS personnel on site have been impressed in the capability of the Striker fire vehicle."

The main role for the No. 22 Squadron team is to provide fire-watch when helicopters land at the bases for hot refuel operations. Hot exhaust from the helicopter's engines, coupled with the downwash from the main rotors and the presence of fuel, increases the risk of fire and warrants a dedicated rescue team. "By not having to shut down the helicopter, they can refuel and return to the fire fight in less than half the time. Hot refuels are only conducted if there is imminent risk of life or property loss as a result of fire activity."

Because the Striker ARFF vehicle is purpose-built for responding to aircraft fires, the crew can remain inside the vehicle cabin during the refueling, allowing them to drive to each helicopter being refueled. Their civilian counterparts would need to physically stand with a hose at each refuel, taking time to move between each helicopter.

The operational tempo at these airfields is dependent on the weather and fire conditions. "On some days we've only supported a handful of hot refuels, on other hot days, crews have supported 20 or 30," Sergeant Allen said. "The busiest day so far was 21 December, with crews supporting 52 hot refuels."

Initially, the No. 22 Squadron firefighters worked from an airfield established at a sportsground in Picton, which consisted of two large grass areas that served as landing grounds for the helicopters. "An Erickson Skycrane and a Chinook operated from one area, and up to seven smaller water bombing and command and control helicopters operated from the other area," Sergeant Allen said. This included Iroquois, Firehawk (Black Hawk), Jetranger and Squirrel helicopters. From January 10, the No. 22 Squadron firefighters relocated to Mittagong Airfield in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

"At Mittagong, the facilities are more spread out as it's an operating airstrip," Sergeant Allen said. The presence of a RAAF Striker ARFF vehicle, complete with camouflage paint scheme at a civilian airfield has attracted some attention from other firefighters and the local community alike. "The nature of helicopter operations seems to attract the public and I've seen many people take the opportunity to snap a photo of the Striker fire truck as we've driven past," Sergeant Allen said. "I spoke to multiple members of the public who said it was great to see Defence supporting their community."



36. Defence aircraft loads varied based on the needs of the community, Emergency Services and Defence requirements. Throughout the Operation over 1 300 personnel were transported and in excess of 320 000 kilos of cargo was moved by ADF aircraft<sup>12</sup>. Personnel moved included firefighters, State Emergency Service operators, civilian evacuees, Non-Government Organisation representatives, infrastructure engineers, NSW State representatives, media, and Defence personnel. Cargo moved included fuel, food, fodder, helicopters and vehicles, and critical engineering equipment.

37. While Air Force assets moved the majority of personnel and cargo, assistance was also received from Navy and Army who provided rotary-wing platforms. In particular, Army's CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters proved their significant worth in the time critical movement of personnel and heavy cargo to locations unable to be supported by fixed-wing aircraft. International assistance was also received from the New Zealand Defence Force; the Republic of Singapore Air Force and the Japanese Self-Defense Force, who provided heavy-lift aircraft. These aircraft conducted evacuations, search and rescue, fire spotting and mapping, fodder drops to feed isolated stock, generator and satellite phone deliveries, plus resupply of food and water. A Canadian CC-177 Globemaster heavy-lift aircraft supported the delivery of fire retardant during the firefighting effort.

38. Community focussed flights also occurred with the evacuation of injured wildlife along with the delivery of medical and water purification kits and personnel protective equipment to Defence personnel, firefighters and isolated community members.

39. Defence also conducted a range of aerial imagery flights. These flights included evaluation of active fires, fire movement, fire spotting, and assessing town and infrastructure damage. The Defence aircraft conducting these tasks included unmanned aerial systems, rotary-wing and fixed-wing platforms.

40. Defence air bases were also made available to chartered aircraft undertaking fire-fighting missions. A notable example being HMAS Albatross in Nowra, which sustained not only ADF flying operations, but supported foreign military and emergency services aircraft whilst managing its own bushfire threat.

### **Aircraft incident support**

41. Defence played a significant role in assisting two aircraft incidents resulting from fire-fighting activities.

42. On 9 January 2020, a civilian Bell UH-1H Iroquois helicopter, under contract with the NSW Government, was conducting fire-fighting operations near Eden. The helicopter, while refilling with water from the Ben Boyd Reservoir, lost altitude and crashed into the water. On 12 January 2020, Navy and Army teams, in conjunction with Fire and Rescue NSW retrieved the helicopter.

43. In the second incident, on 23 January 2020 a Coulson Aviation C-130 Hercules aircraft, contracted by the NSW Government departed RAAF Base Richmond to undertake fire-fighting operations in the Snowy Monaro area. While on task the aircraft impacted the ground in the

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to Australian Defence Force aviation capabilities, the New Zealand Defence Force, the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Japanese Self-Defense Force and the Republic of Indonesia provided ground support and various fixed and rotary-wing assets in support of the NSW bushfire emergency and Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST 2019–20.

vicinity of Cooma. Defence using Air Force fixed-wing aircraft, in conjunction with State authorities, were tasked to locate the aircraft crash site in very difficult operating conditions. Once the crash site was located, Defence helicopters inserted a recovery team consisting of Defence and State Government personnel, including HAZMAT specialists to secure the site. Defence helicopters also completed a transfer of family members and Coulson company personnel to the crash site on 26 January 2020.

### **Defence Bases—Accommodation and assistance to evacuees and others**

44. Commencing in November 2019, Defence opened two bases to provide accommodation to NSW emergency workers. From 4 January 2020, Defence opened additional bases across NSW to provide accommodation to evacuees, reservists and emergency workers. Table 1 outlines the number of people accommodated at these Defence bases.

**Table 1: Accommodation across NSW Defence Bases**

<b>Defence Bases Occupied</b>	<b>Evacuees accommodated</b>	<b>Reservists accommodated</b>	<b>Emergency Workers accommodated</b>
HMAS <i>Albatross</i> Nowra NSW	2	36	1 609
HMAS <i>Harman</i> Jerrabomberra ACT	30	186	0030
Holsworthy Barracks Holsworthy NSW	0	265	420
Randwick Barracks Randwick NSW	0	9	0
Lone Pine Barracks Singleton NSW	0	49	0
RAAF Base Richmond NSW	2	0	0
RAAF Base Wagga Wagga NSW	28	0	26
Duntroon Garrison (RMC/ADFA) Campbell ACT	0	0	1 200

**Note:** HMAS *Penguin* and HMAS *Watson*, Blamey Barracks Kapooka, and RAAF Base Williamtown were also made available but were not required.

45. Defence provided accommodation and meals to evacuees and emergency service personnel. The bases were both a refuge and base of operations for the emergency response. Defence Call Centre operations were increased and provided an around-the-clock helpline to ensure that community members had immediate access to safe accommodation.

46. Defence provided evacuees (and their pets) with food and transport to bases and evacuation centres. Evacuees were provided with meals shelter and access to base facilities, such as swimming pools and Wi-Fi. Defence engaged frequently with NSW State authorities, Evacuation Centres and Emergency Operation Centres across the impacted regions, to assist evacuees requiring longer-term accommodation solutions.

### **Conclusion**

47. Defence values the long-standing collaboration shared with the NSW State Government and with NSW Office of Emergency Management. Defence standing liaison arrangements proved effective and the collaboration enabled Defence to posture appropriately and respond quickly and effectively to requests for assistance.

48. Defence undertook the majority of bushfire related tasks, in support of NSW, from November 2019 through to late February 2020. Defence assistance to NSW increased from early January 2020 by the unfolding emergency on the NSW South Coast during the course of the fires. The focus of Defence support to NSW transitioned from liaison, through to emergency assistance and the safety of life and property, to span response and initial recovery operations, while always working in support of NSW state authorities.

49. Regular liaison between Defence, Emergency Services NSW and Emergency Management Australia will continue to be a critical mechanism to ensure Defence support is effective and responsive. Additionally, Defence will work with Emergency Management Australia to identify opportunities for continued liaison and where appropriate, take opportunities for collaborative learning and preparation.

50. In supporting Emergency Services NSW and communities, Defence saw the greatest value in providing capabilities that complement state capabilities in particular transport, engineers, aviation, medical support and logistics/sustainment capabilities.

**Attachments:**

1. NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry – Terms of Reference dated 10 February 2020
2. NSW Request for Information re ADF Response Deployment dated 18 March 2020
3. Defence response to NSW request for information re ADF response deployment in support of NSW independent inquiry into the NSW bushfire season 2019–20

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# NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry – Terms of Reference

Published 10th February, 2020

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The Inquiry is to consider, and report to the Premier on, the following matters.

1. The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.
2. The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effect.
3. Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including:
  - immediate management, including the issuing of public warnings
  - resourcing, coordination and deployment
  - equipment and communication systems.
4. Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.

And to make recommendations arising from the Inquiry as considered appropriate, including on:

5. Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.
6. Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices.
7. Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems.

8. Emergency responses to bushfires, including overall human and capital resourcing.
  9. Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments.
  10. Safety of first responders.
  11. Public communication and advice systems and strategies.
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[REDACTED]  
Defence Review team  
Australian Defence Force

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

**Request for information re ADF response deployment**

I write to request that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) provide the following information to the Independent Inquiry into the NSW Bushfire Season 2019-2020:

- ADF preparation for and response to the bushfire season 2019/20
- Deployment to State Operations Centre (SOC) – date deployed
- Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC)
  - How did the DACC requests work during this bushfire season?
  - Nature and type of requests received (Do you have a breakdown of the number and nature of the DACC requests)
  - Timeframes in actioning these requests
  - Could improvements be made to the DACC process? e.g. speeding up the decision-making process, nominated officer in the SOC having the ability to deploy/commit resources immediately.
- Integration into SOC
  - Could this be improved and if so how?
  - How were ADF activities communicated to State agencies.
- Does the ADF have the ability to supply direct and live feeds into the SOC from aircraft and has this ever been undertaken
- Would an improvement to the current process be agencies improved understanding of the resources that are available to them through the ADF? If so how could this be achieved?

**Defence Land:**

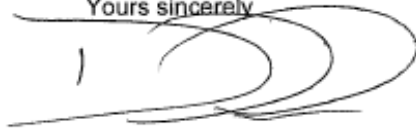
- The current locations of land holdings across NSW
- What are the current firefighting arrangements and fire management activities on defence land?
- How does defence firefighting resources link/coordinate with NSW agency resources?
- How are boundaries managed with NSW public land managers e.g. National Parks NSW, and private land (e.g. residential)?
- How much defence land was impacted by 2019-2020 fires?
- Which fires impacted the land?
- Who controlled fire suppression activities on this land?

- We have been informed that on some bases (Jennings) that firefighters are required to hand in mobile phones prior to coming onto that land. Is this a blanket rule or only for specific bases? Why are they required to hand over mobile phones?
- Does hazard reduction occur on defence bases? If so, whose responsibility is it to undertake this hazard reduction?

Under the Inquiry's terms of reference (enclosed), the Inquiry is to consider matters including coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Commonwealth. As such, the Inquiry will be greatly assisted by the requested information, for the purpose of informing its final report.

The Inquiry would like to refer to information provided by the ADF in response to this request in its Report, so we would request that you mark any material that you would not want publicly disclosed.

Yours sincerely



Dave Owens APM  
Head of Inquiry  
18/3/20.



Mary O'Kane  
Head of Inquiry

18/3/20



## **DEFENCE RESPONSE TO NSW REQUEST FOR INFORMATION RE ADF RESPONSE DEPLOYMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE NSW INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE NSW BUSHFIRE SEASON 2019-2020**

### **Defence - Response to Bushfires in NSW**

The primary role of Defence is to provide for the security of Australia. However, Australian Defence Force capabilities can be, and are, used to provide support to natural disaster and emergency responses.

Defence supports the whole-of-Government response to natural disasters and emergencies through the Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) arrangements. The support provided is influenced by a variety of factors which include: ongoing operations, resources available, potential risk to ADF personnel, and any requests from other states and territories, where applicable. These assessments, ensure that support is provided on a priority basis.

The following table provides additional detail (to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry—Terms of Reference) in response to specific questions to Defence, on how Defence worked with NSW authorities to provide assistance during the bushfire emergency, and how bushfires are managed and responded to on Defence estate.

<b>REQUEST FOR INFORMATION RE ADF RESPONSE DEPLOYMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE NSW INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE NSW BUSHFIRE SEASON 2019–2020</b>	
<b>Date of deployment to State Operations Centre (SOC)?</b>	
	On request from the NSW State Emergency Operations Centre, Defence provided liaison officers to the NSW RFS Headquarters from 31 October 2019.
<b>DACC: How did DACC requests work during the Bushfire Season?</b>	
	The DACC request process was largely effective given the close working relationship between Defence (Joint Operations Support Staff (JOSS) and other Defence liaison members) and the NSW SOC. The DACC request process, and the understanding of the Defence capabilities and resources available to assist improved as the bushfire response developed.
<b>DACC: Nature and type of DACC requests received?</b>	
	The majority of DACC requests from the NSW Government consisted of accommodation provision, catering support, air and airfield support (including refuelling), engineering and logistical support.
<b>DACC: Timeframes in actioning these requests?</b>	
	DACC request response timeframes varied based on the type of task requested and the complexity of the task. The simple tasks were responded to with a few hours. Those that required assessment were generally actioned within 48 hours of task receipt.
<b>DACC: Could improvements be made to DACC process?</b>	
	Defence assesses the DACC process was effective in responding to Bushfire Season 2019-20. DACC policy is established to work with current whole-of-Government arrangements. Any recommendations to change these arrangements will require Defence to review DACC Policy.

<p><b>Integration into the SOC:</b></p> <p><b>Could this be improved and if so how?</b></p> <p><b>How were ADF activities communicated to State Agencies?</b></p> <p><b>Would an improvement to the current process by agencies improve understanding of the resources that are available to them through the ADF? If so, how could this be achieved?</b></p>
<p>Defence was initially well integrated into the SOC and there is a close working relationship between Defence (JOSS) and the NSW SOC staff. The decision to establish the Disaster Recovery Office on 8 Jan 20, in response to the scale and intensity of the bushfires created an effective mechanism to coordinate all levels of government support to the bushfire fighting effort. The Joint Task Force Commander and staff paired with Disaster Recovery Office and established a process where requests could be received, scoped and prioritised. Defence was then able to action the request. Habitual relationships, established liaison and mutual understanding are essential in an emergency response. Investment in liaison and collaborative planning prior to an emergency or disaster will set the foundations for effective integration and understanding.</p>
<p><b>Does the ADF have the ability to supply direct and live feeds into the SOC from aircraft and has this ever been undertaken?</b></p>
<p>Defence does not have the ability to supply direct and live imagery feeds into the NSW SOC from any Defence aircraft.</p>
<p><b>Defence Land: The current locations of land holdings across NSW?</b></p>
<p>Defence has over 200 land holdings within NSW including major Bases, Reserve and Cadet Units and Defence Training Areas. Bushfire management activities are conducted in both metropolitan and rural NSW areas deemed to be Bushfire Prone. These areas include Defence Bases, Defence Facilities and Defence Training Areas (DTA):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HMAS <i>Penguin</i></li> <li>• HMAS <i>Waterhen</i></li> <li>• HMAS <i>Watson</i></li> <li>• HMAS <i>Albatross</i></li> <li>• HMAS <i>Creswell</i></li> <li>• Fleet Base East Sydney</li> <li>• Blamey Barracks Kapooka</li> <li>• Holsworthy DTA</li> <li>• Singleton DTA</li> <li>• Marrangaroo DTA</li> <li>• RAAF Base Williamtown</li> <li>• RAAF Base Glenbrook</li> <li>• RAAF Base Wagga</li> <li>• Defence Establishment Orchard Hills</li> <li>• Wirlinga Ammunition Depot (Albury)</li> <li>• Beecroft Weapons Range and Bherwerre Ridge (Jervis Bay)</li> <li>• Defence Facility Twofold Bay Eden</li> </ul>
<p><b>Defence Land: What are the current firefighting arrangements and fire management activities on Defence Land?</b></p>
<p>Defence manages approximately 600 sites around Australia, covering more than 2.7 million hectares, with over 150 of these sites currently classified as bushfire prone. These 2019–20 bushfires have impacted a number of Defence sites in NSW, including HMAS Albatross, Marrangaroo Defence Training Area, and the Singleton Defence Training Area. Defence’s approach to bushfire management is aligned to the Australian Government’s National Bushfire Management: Policy Statement for Forests and Rangelands (2012), which sets out principles, strategic objectives and national goals for bushfire management. Defence specific policy for bushfire management is contained within the Manual for Fire Protection and Engineering (MFPE) and the Defence Environment &amp; Heritage Manual (DEHM). Defence policy aims to protect, support and promote (in order of priority):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human life</li> <li>• Defence and civilian property and assets</li> <li>• ADF training, and</li> <li>• Environmentally sustainable bushfire management.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Bushfire Management Plans</b></p> <p>To manage the risk of bushfires across the Defence estate, Defence implements a series of controls and captures these in a Bushfire Management Plan (BMP) for each bushfire-prone property with overall site bushfire risk of medium to high. Each BMP is subject to review every five years.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BMPs provide guidance on the legislative, planning, response and awareness controls for bushfire management</li> <li>• BMPs document the fire environment, assess the risks associated with bushfire hazards and detail the bushfire mitigation works to treat identified risks.</li> <li>• BMPs identify works required to reduce risks associated with bushfire hazards. These works included upgrading or maintaining bushfire trails and breaks, conducting controlled burns and creating or maintaining asset protection zones around buildings.</li> <li>• BMPs are used to guide the effective mitigation of seasonal and Defence activity impacts. Following annual assessment, identified mitigation activities are documented in the annual Bushfire Mitigation Works</li> </ul>

Schedules and Bushfire Burn Implementation Plans. These schedules and plans identify when the works will be completed and are executed through Base Service Contracts.

- While the aim of a BMP is to reduce the risk of bushfires on the Defence estate, it is important to note that bushfire risk is always changing due to vegetation growth, land use changes, and climate shifts. Defence has a three year BMP renewal program currently being delivered.
- BMPs are developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including a minimum review opportunity of 20 business days for the NSW RFS.

### **Fuel Load Management on the Defence Estate**

Fuel loads are managed differently across the Defence Estate. Defence's focus is on maintaining and improving ecosystem resilience, usability of Defence training areas, as well as fuel load management. Individual BMPs identify landscape fuel load thresholds and annual Overall Fuel Hazard Assessments advise where thresholds have been exceeded.

Fire mitigation includes primary and secondary control measures. Primary controls include establishing Asset Protection Zones, maintaining fire breaks and access roads, and retaining fire response capability and assets. Secondary mitigation includes hazard reduction burns, mechanical fuel load reduction (such as mulching, grading, removing), and the management of invasive and often highly flammable weed species.

### **Burn Plans**

Hazard reduction burning is a highly technical job requiring knowledge of weather, fire behaviour, suppression techniques, and environmental effects of fire. Prior to undertaking any hazard reduction burns, a Burn Plan is developed, and is essential for:

- determining the vegetation that needs to be burnt and needs to be left unburnt (mosaic), the desired fire intensity and the season
- reviewing the history and variety of past fire events over the landscape
- studying and measuring the quantity, arrangement and moisture content of fuels
- determining, monitoring and forecasting the right weather conditions for igniting a burn using knowledge about fire behaviour
- determining the best time of day to ignite a burn in a specified pattern and sequence to achieve the desired outcomes and to prevent fire from escaping
- monitoring the results of a burn to determine how well the operation met the objectives set for the burn
- using knowledge gained and lessons learned to improve future prescribed burning operations.
- Managing and protecting ecological and heritage values
- Confirming appropriate level of resource commitment to meet burn plan objectives

Importantly, best practice Burn Plans involve careful planning, consultation and integration with external agencies and State and Territory authorities who have shared responsibilities managing bushfire risk across the landscape.

### **Firefighting arrangements on Defence Training Areas**

Defence manages two contracted service providers that provide 'First Response' bushfire fighting capability to Defence establishments.

Base Service contractors, BGIS Australia provide 'first response' bushfire fighting capability, including the provision of designated fire fighting vehicles, equipment and crews to Defence Training Areas at Singleton, Holsworthy, and Marrangaroo. Base Service contractor, Spotless provides 'first response' at Beecroft Weapons Range and Bherwerre Ridge Jervis Bay.

The minimum level of 'first response' enables the extinguishment or containment of a fire as soon as possible from the time of ignition. Upon detection of a fire, the contractor reports its existence to the Defence Training Area Range Control Officer and the local RFS authority. The contractor continues fighting the fire, within the limitations of equipment, crew size and crew competencies, until it is extinguished or control of fire suppression has been handed over to the responding RFS.

### **Rescue and Firefighting Services**

Rescue and Fire Fighting Services are delivered by Base Services contractors at:

- HMAS *Albatross*
- HMAS *Creswell*
- Blamey Barracks Kapooka
- RAAF Base Wagga
- Wirlinga Ammunition Depot (Albury)
- Defence Facility Twofold Bay Eden
- Beecroft Weapons Range and Bherwerre Ridge (Jervis Bay)

### **Bushfire Mitigation Works Schedules**

Annual Bushfire Mitigation Works Schedules (BMWS) apply the aims and objectives of the Bushfire Management Plan on the estate and further refines and aligns them with:

- current conditions (such as drought or above-average rainfall events)
- factors in any previous fire (planned and unplanned) activity, and
- proposed training activity.

BMWS' are informed by annual assessments that consider up to date information arising from on-ground fuel load potential and ecological indicators. The BMWS then assigns mitigation works, including ecologically appropriate fire regimes, for the vegetation ecosystems identified in the Bushfire Management Plan for the site.

### **Defence Land: How does Defence firefighting resources link / coordinate with NSW agency resources?**

There are three levels of engagement with State and Territory Authorities:

- The Commonwealth Department of Finance administers a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the States and Territories for the provision of fire-fighting services on Commonwealth land including Defence properties. The MOU sets down an annual payment by the Commonwealth to the States and Territories that essentially replicates the function of a landholder paying emergency services levies in rates.
- In addition to the overarching Commonwealth Memorandum of Understanding, Defence has a Memorandum of Understanding with New South Wales RFS. This agreement sets out a framework for inter-agency interactions in jointly managing bushfire risk on Defence land; Defence support for RFS bushfire fighting operations; and ensuring mutual organisational readiness for emergency bushfire response. The Memorandum of Understanding sets out arrangements for the use of Defence resources that are potentially available to assist in any response to fire, irrespective of whether the fire occurs on Defence land. These include accommodation, airfield facilities, heavy plant and personnel, fire-fighting aircraft, data sharing agreements, training and advice.
- The third level of engagement is in the form of a Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA). The MAA has been developed or is in the process of being developed for key Defence NSW properties. Each MAA is executed between Defence's Base Manager and the RFS District Manager. The MAA documents the local cooperative framework and agreed commitments between Defence and the RFS in relation to the management of bushfires and bushfire hazard mitigation activities for fires within or threatening a Defence property. Specific details include: RFS and Defence contacts for each property; areas of operation for each Defence property; special entry arrangements; operational constraints; and infrastructure and fire response arrangements for each Defence property. MAA's are in place in the following NSW sites:
  - HMAS *Albatross*
  - Holsworthy Defence Training Area
  - Marrangaroo Defence Training Area
  - Singleton Defence Training Area
  - RAAF Base Glenbrook
  - RAAF Base Williamtown
  - Defence Establishment Orchard Hills
  - Moorebank Area (MAA with Sutherland, Lithgow and McArthur Districts).

### **Defence Land: How are boundaries managed with NSW public land managers? (National Parks NSW and private land owners)**

The Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA) mandates that the Defence Base Manager attends local Bushfire Management Committees that are chaired by the NSW RFS and includes participation by local stakeholders and other government entities. The Defence / NSW RFS Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) also allows for sharing of Bushfire Management Plans (BMPs) and Bushfire Mitigation Works Schedules (BMWS) for Defence Bases.

### **Defence Land: How much Defence land was effected by the 2019–20 Bushfires?**

Bushfires impacted HMAS Albatross, Marrangaroo Defence Training Area, Singleton Defence Training Area, and Defence Facilities at Twofold Bay, Eden.

- HMAS *Albatross* was impacted by the Currowan Fire with approximately 73 hectares of vegetation burnt.
- Marrangaroo Defence Training Area was impacted by the Gospers Fire with approximately 12 700 hectares of vegetation burnt.
- Singleton Defence Training Area was impacted by the Gospers Fire with approximately one hectare of vegetation burnt.
- Defence Facility Twofold Bay, Eden was impacted by the Mallacoota Victoria fire, with approximately 90 hectares of vegetation burnt.

Additionally, Holsworthy Defence Training Area had two arson fires along the Campbelltown boundary that were fully contained within the area. Each burnt between two and four hectares of vegetation and was attended by Defence personnel and the RFS. Arson fires along this boundary are common.

**Defence Land: Which fires affected the land?**

- the Currowan Fire affected HMAS *Albatross*.
- the Gaspers Fire affected Marrangaroo and Singleton Defence Training Areas
- the Mallacoota Fire affected Defence Facility Twofold Bay Eden.

**Defence Land: Who controlled fire suppression activities on this land?**

- the Currowan Fire (HMAS *Albatross*) was managed by Defence Base Services contractors and the NSW RFS
- the Gaspers Fire (Marrangaroo and Singleton Defence Training Areas) was under the control of the NSW Rural Fires Act s44 appointee.
- the Mallacoota Fire (Defence Facility Twofold Bay, Eden) was managed by the NSW RFS.

**Defence Land: We (NSW) have been informed that on some Bases (Jennings NSW) that firefighters are required to hand in mobile phones prior to coming onto that land. Is this a blanket rule or only for specific Bases? Why are they required to hand over mobile phones?**

Specific Defence bases and establishment are classed as Major Hazardous Facilities; Jennings NSW is one such facility. At these bases and establishments mobile phones are not permitted due to the potential ignition risk such devices may pose to the materiel stored therein.

**Defence Land: Do Hazard reductions occur on Defence Bases? If so, whose responsibility is it to undertake hazard reduction?**

Hazard Reduction Burns (HRB) occur on Defence bases.

HRBs are required for many reasons across both private and public land, including reducing bushfire risk, flora and fauna ecological requirements, regeneration, cultural, land management, and to support Defence land usage. HRBs also offer a cost effective option to effectively reduce fuel loads across large landscapes. Defence carefully considers the bushfire risk, weather conditions, fuel load moisture, and the landscape ecosystem before undertaking a hazard reduction burn.

Within Defence the Estate and Infrastructure Group is responsible for the delivery of all bushfire mitigation works across Defence, including HRB. Delivery of works occurs through a management model that incorporates Defence Base Managers as individual decision makers on fuel load risk, and the currency of Bushfire Management Plans, with the Director Estate, Environment and Energy Service Delivery (DEEESD) as the authority accountable for coordinating, approving, and performance management of the delivery of the Bushfire Mitigation Works Schedules. The Defence Base Services Contractor is the primary entity responsible for the delivery of works.