

Addendum to Submission to NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

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This submission is written as an Addendum to my previous submission. It should be read in conjunction with the original submission.

Community Fire Units/Local Response Units

During the fires around the NSW Coast fire units were deployed into fire grounds from around the state. The intensity and spread of the fires meant that local fire units were often not available to protect local population centres. This situation left local communities without any capability to respond to fires in their immediate area other than garden hoses and buckets.

Many urban communities that are situated on the interface with bushland have been equipped with firefighting equipment through a Community Fire Unit (CFU) program. In NSW this program is run by NSW Fire and Rescue and ACT Fire and Rescue run a similar program around high-risk areas of the Canberra urban interface. Rural and Remote communities would now benefit greatly from a similar program although some of the equipment in the CFU would need to be tailored to the local situation (e.g. is mains water available or not?).

An alternative solution would be to increase the number of vehicle response units in local areas and then restrict the deployment of those additional units to the local community area only. The additional vehicles should not require special licences to operate. Such units could be manned by community volunteers with less training than that delivered to the normal rural fire fighters. These vehicles could also be considered as CFUs operated by the local community

Team Rubicon Australia (TRA)

After the disaster of NYE 2019 the attention of bushfire affected residents shifted to recovering any valuables that might have survived the inferno. A number of residents asked the Conjola Recovery Team if they could arrange for members of Team Rubicon Australia to be deployed into the Conjola area to sift through the wreckage of their properties using their specialised techniques to look for these valuables.

Initially, TRA advised that they should be able to provide assistance after completing existing tasking. They were unable to provide support as more properties were lost in the Bega Valley Shire and TRA remained in location to provide support. No support was provided to the Conjola area. The limitation to TRA's operations is financial support. This organisation provides unique and highly valued support to communities affected by natural disasters. TRA's current capability should be increased to deal with larger scale operations. Additional funding should be provided by the Department of Defence and the Department of Veteran's Affairs.

Further roles should be considered for TRA when the ADF has been deployed on DACC tasking. The support provided by the ADF was invaluable during the recent bushfires. However, this support was late and also ended abruptly. TRA members have the skills and organisational capability to follow on from ADF units when DACC tasking has moved into Community Engagement operations. Most Community Engagement operations require labour, trucks and sometimes limited chainsaw tasks. TRA members are well suited to complete these tasks.

Donations and Community Recovery Funds

Shortly after forming the volunteer Conjola Recovery Team began receiving cash donations from donors wishing to support the local recovery effort. Initially, the recovery team asked that any cash donations be directed to the Shoalhaven Mayoral Bushfire Disaster Fund. Donors flatly refused saying that their donations were to be used solely for the benefit of the local Conjola Community.

As a consequence, the recovery team was forced to establish a fund of their own into which such cash donations could be deposited. A discovery effort followed that consumed a large amount of volunteer effort and pro bono support. This effort is still continuing as setting up and registering charitable funds and the like is a complex process. Decisions regarding whether to apply for Deductible Gift Recipient status or not and other taxation issues have had to be made – and altered as the recovery process moved on. Simple and clear advice to cater for situations where volunteer organisations suddenly confront the need to establish charitable funds should be centrally and readily available.

Centrelink Operations

Immediately after the NYE 2019 fires struck the Conjola area residents needed to apply for Centrelink managed Disaster Relief Funds. After approximately ten days Centrelink deployed a mobile support centre to the Conjola area and other areas in the Shoalhaven. This service was excellent and the officers staffing the mobile centre displayed empathy coupled with professionalism. They were the first organisation to deploy with their own satellite linked communications system.

Subsequently, the Centrelink focus shifted from the mobile centre to the Ulladulla Recovery Centre when it was established by the NSW government. As the recovery effort moved forward the Centrelink effort shifted again, this time from the Recovery centre to the local Centrelink office in Ulladulla.

The service provided by the staff at local Centrelink offices has been unsatisfactory. Bushfire affected residents have been treated rudely and often with disdain. For most this has been their first ever encounter with a Centrelink office and this should never be allowed to be repeated. When the provision of Centrelink disaster relief support is relocated into local Centrelink offices there should be a separate area provided for affected residents to seek advice and support payments. Staff in this area need to be appropriately trained for this task.

Recovery Support from Commercial Organisations

Many commercial organisations offered support to various volunteer community led recovery efforts. At times communities also sought assistance from the commercial world. There is no simple 'window' available through which this support can be seen and requested by bona fide community recovery organisations. The 'Give It' donations hub is an excellent example of what is needed in other areas of support. A platform is required through which community led recovery organisations can connect to businesses offering their support to disaster affected communities.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

49. Rural and remote communities be provided with a Community Fire Unit capability tailored to the local situation.
50. Team Rubicon Australia's current capability should be increased to deal with larger scale operations and follow-on operations after ADF DACC tasks are halted. Additional funding should be provided by the Department of Defence and the Department of Veteran's Affairs.
51. Simple and clear advice should be centrally and readily available catering for disaster situations where community led recovery organisations confront the need to quickly establish charitable funds.
52. When the provision of Centrelink disaster relief support is relocated into local Centrelink offices there should be a separate area provided for affected residents to seek advice and support payments. Staff in this area need to be appropriately trained for this task.
53. A platform is required through which community led recovery organisations can connect to businesses offering their support to disaster affected communities.